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Dussasana drags Draupadi to Duryodhana's court: Yakshagana

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# From the Editor

**A** FEW years ago I was reading a collection of essays on music (*Alapini* by W.H. Deshpande). The author discussing a very distinguished vocalist was confronted with the *bandishes* which the concerned vocalist had himself authored. Deshpande in his essay discusses these compositions as literature and then suddenly goes on the defensive declaring that literature has nothing to do with music. His argument appears to be that *shabda* is irrelevant to music. Music cannot be composed of silences, as Prof. Ranade points out in his article in this issue. W.H. Deshpande would agree but would go on to argue (and Ranade would agree with him) that the words, i.e., the literary cognition is not central to the aesthetics of music.

But then what happens when someone enjoys a ghazal rendered by Begum Akhtar or a composition of Tukaram or Purandaradas by Bhimsen Joshi? We do not know. The point is that the question of 'content', 'continuity', 'modernism', should also be debated in the context of music. What perceptions do we have when an ancient tradition like that of *khayal gayaki* is taken a fresh look at in a hitherto unexplored manner? The essays by Ashok Ranade and Neela Khopkar try to grapple with some of these problems.

To an extent, the problem of continuity, the problem of the language of painting (not unlike the language of music), the temporal and spatial aspects of art, are also the concern of Pranabranjan Ray's essay. Meenakshi Mukherjee's analysis of *Pather Panchali* also deals with the



time-sequences, history and memory, in short the temporal and spatial implications of a creative effort. In this sense, although they vary widely from each other in terms of what they have to say, these essays on music, the visual arts, and a remarkable Bengali novel, are held together by the problems they are trying to explore. The answers, of course, are not necessarily the same.

But that is not the only theme we argue in this issue. Unlike Pranab Ray who questions the whole concept of internationalism in art, Ayyappa Paniker affirms just the opposite. Paniker's researches into forms of drama leads him to see remarkable similarities between the east and the west, and it is these parallelisms he sets forth in his essay.

With this issue JAI completes one year of its existence. We hope we have given you provocative enough reading material. Now we need your assistance. Donations, subscriptions and advertisements are most welcome. But more important, join this debate.

The creative enterprise in India has a link, however tenuous, with other cultures, notably the west. But within India -- the spatial and temporal context of this enterprise -- there is little exchange. Creativity, like music, cannot be built on silences alone! So write for us. Write on music, painting, architecture, literature, especially from Indian languages. The ancients said: '*Bhishak bhishajasaha samabhasheta*'. Physicians must talk to physicians (so that the science of medicine grows). GPD

# Contributors

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# Traditional Indian Theatre and Experimental Western Theatre

Ayyappa Paniker

**T**HIS PAPER tries to make a preliminary investigation of the similarities and parallelisms between the theory and practice of the traditional theatre in India and those of the experimental theatre in the West, particularly of recent times. It is not concerned with a comparative study of the dramatic literature in India and the West; its focus is on problems relating to the presentation of plays on the stage in front of an audience. For the purpose of this investigation, traditional Indian theatre is identified under three heads: one, classical Sanskrit theatre drawing support from works such as *Natya Sastra*, *Abhinaya Darpana*, *Sangita Ratnakara*, etc.; two, ritual theatre covering a very wide range of castes and communities; and three, folk/tribal theatre, equally diversified and often secular in spirit. By experimental Western theatre we mean here all the major innovations in European theatre with their slow beginnings in the nineteenth century, which have in general moved away from Aristotelian canons and post-Renaissance illusionism. Among these may be mentioned (a) the Symbolical, Stylized Theatre of Vsevolod Meyerhold, (b) the Epic Theatre of Bertold Brecht, (c) the Theatre of Cruelty of Antonin Artaud, (d) the Theatre of Poverty of Jerzy Grotowski, and (e) the Environmental Theatre of Richard Schechner.

Traditional Indian theatre is basically non-illusionistic. Although works on dramaturgy use terms like *avasthanukriti* and *lokavrittananukaranam* to define *natya*, *anukriti* and *anukaranam* are not to be taken to mean imitation or copying, but creation modelled on what is found



in the world, yet sufficiently distanced from it by the operation of imagination. *Lokadharmi* or acting after the manner of the world is allowed as a kind of foil to the dominant style of acting which is known as *natyadharmi*. The use of *touryatrikam* (singing, dancing, and instrumental music) enhances the *natyadharmi* or theatrical aspect of stage presentation. The texts of the plays are so composed as to provide scope for exploiting the musical and dancing resources of the actors and actresses. The four types of *abhinaya* (*angika*, *vacika*, *aharya* and *sattvika*) help to suggest that there is no attempt to merely represent external reality through the performance of the play. *Angika* refers to the use of an elaborately coded alphabet of symbolic gestures or *mudras*, while *vacika* or speech is highly stylized or even sung, sometimes by the actor, but often by singers employed for that purpose. *Aharya* or make-up and costume is also too stylized to be realistic. When superhuman characters or supernatural forces are to be presented on the stage, realistic or period costume and make-up would serve no purpose. The fourth type of *abhinaya*, namely, *sattvika* or mental acting, is defined in *Sangita Ratnakara* as 'the indication of the internal feelings of the actor (also reciprocated by the spectators)'.<sup>1</sup> The *Ekaharya* or *Pakarnnattam* style of rendering where the same actor impersonates different characters without change of make-up or costume also destroys the impression of realism aimed at in illusionistic drama. The tendency to improvise for hours without any textual support, so frequently resorted to by performers in the Indian theatre, where the skill of a gifted actor is displayed in his *manodharma* or free play of imagination, is yet another factor that emphasizes the absence of illusionism. Siegfried Melchinger explains the non-illusionistic nature of the Indian theatre (after mentioning the fact that Goethe's 'Prologue in the Theatre' came from Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*):

It uses no scenery, only costumes which have a definite symbolic significance. It clearly appears to be derived from shadow and puppet plays, and consequently has a great deal of mimicry and gesture, elements which are as strictly regulated and familiar to the audience as in the Chinese drama. The pantomimic element has the greatest significance; it figures in the theory of the feelings applied to practical production in the manuals of *Natya-Sastra*: the feelings are as varied as they are artificial. Naturalness is intended only nominally. Brecht refers to this when he speaks of the Indian 'Masters of delicate feelings'. (In his play *A Man's a Man*, which is



set in India, Brecht has shown as another characteristic trait of this theater: playing with toys; an elephant is represented by means of toys.) Music and dance are not dispensed with; the connection with mime is strong, particularly with reference to the *vidushaka* and other characters who resemble the types of the *Commedia dell'arte*. Unlike the Greek drama, the Indian drama is not tragic. All the productions of the Indian theater (basic authority: Silvain Levi, *Theatre indien*, 1890) show the incredible artificiality, refinement, subtlety, and sublimation for which this non-illusionistic theater strives in its great creations, particularly in those of Kalidasa. The connection between Strindberg's *Dream Play* and Indian drama goes beyond the similarities of subject matter. There was an Indian renaissance in the Russian theater revolution: Tairov opened his theater in Moscow in 1914 with *Shakuntala*.<sup>2</sup>

While most of the characteristic features mentioned above may be found in all forms of traditional Indian theatre, they are more common in classical Sanskrit theatre such as represented by Koodiyattam. Ritual theatre still preserved by many communities in different parts of India helps to keep alive the link between theatre and *yajna* or sacrifice, as maintained by M. Christopher Byrski in his *Concept of Ancient Indian Theatre* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1974). Among the features special to ritual theatre may be mentioned (a) the element of cruelty and violence, often kept out of classical theatre; (b) the idea of theatre as therapy whereby a patient devotee may be cured of illness or demoniac possession through theatrical exorcism, or a performance is arranged as an offering to the deity to propitiate him or as a form of ancestor worship; and (c) the use of surrealistic devices so as to produce dreamlike or nightmarish effects. The most important aspect of ritual theatre is perhaps the active participation of the audience. Martha Bush Ashton has brought out these aspects of the Spirit Cult festivals in South Kanara:

Meanwhile the priest comes before the altar. Wearing a simple costume (either short red pants adorned with bells or a silk cloth wrapped around his torso and anklets and sometimes a white turban), he is given the spirit's sword, bell and yaktail fan to hold. After he is sprinkled with water, the audience throws rice or flowers on him to signify its request that the spirit enter his body. He begins to shake from his feet up until his entire body is trembl-



ing. Often he shouts wildly, puffs out his cheeks, stares at the sky, and runs to and from the altar. When the priest begins to tremble, one or two musicians play rapid extemporaneous a-melodic doodles on oboe-like instruments called *mauris*. Two to five drummers, each with a different timbred drum, begin to play rapid extemporaneous rhythmic passages. When the priest is close to full trance, this changes to a high-pitched rhythmic repetition of one note, with the drums as loud and rapid as possible. Finally the spirit comes. When the priest is fully possessed, the spirit, through him, relates the *nudi kattu*. This speech, which summarizes the spirit's origin story and the story of how it came to be worshipped in this place, is delivered in a highly stylized and dramatic manner. It includes a short account of how the patron's ancestors conducted the festivals in the past and how the spirit, in turn, treated them.<sup>3</sup>

Folk theatre too shares some of these features with ritual theatre, but it does not always have religious worship associated with them. Audience participation is active here also, but it may be more of a socio-aesthetic nature. There is full utilization of the environment and the communal atmosphere. There is practically no stage decor. Make-up and costume are very simple. The entire production is free from the paraphernalia usually associated with other forms of theatre. In folk theatre it is difficult to make any hard and fast distinction between performer and spectator. Maximum psycho-physical participation of the audience is possible only in folk/tribal theatre. Actors may enter the performance area from any side and spectators are often encouraged to mix with the actors. Folk theatre is total theatre in the fullest sense of the word: it uses all the resources available to the audio-visual medium; it may change the scene of action at will, so that the spectators will have to move from place to place to catch up with the actors; any place is a stage for it, provided the performers decide to perform there.

We may now proceed to identify features common to traditional Indian theatre and experimental theatre in the West. The rejection of illusionism probably started with the later plays of Ibsen and Strindberg, but production and acting techniques got crystallized with some of the pronouncements of Edward Gordon Craig and Alexander Hevesi. In his article 'The Actor and the Uber Marionette' (1907) Gordon Craig rejects the imitation theory of the Aristotelians:



The actor looks upon life as a photomachine looks upon life; and he attempts to make a picture to rival a photograph. He never dreams of his art as being an art such for instance as music. He tries to reproduce Nature; he seldom thinks to invent with the aid of Nature, and he never dreams of *creating*. As I have said, the best he can do when he wants to catch and convey the poetry of a kiss, the heat of a fight, or the calm of death, is to copy slavishly, photographically – he kisses – he fights – he lies back and mimics death – and, when you think of it, is not all this dreadfully stupid? Is it not a poor art and a poor cleverness, which cannot convey the spirit and essence of an idea to an audience, but can only show an artless copy, a facsimile of the thing itself? This is to be an imitator, not an artist, This is to claim kinship with the ventriloquist.<sup>4</sup>

This view has been endorsed by the Hungarian Alexander Hevesi, who is more emphatic on this point:

For more than a hundred years there have been two men working on the stage, spoiling almost all that is to be called Theatrical Art. These two men are the Realist and the Machinist. The Realist offers imitation for life, and the Machinist tricks in place of marvels. So we have lost the main thing possessed by the art. The Art of the Theatre as pure imitation is nothing but an alarming demonstration of the abundance of life and the narrowness of Art.<sup>5</sup>

One of the staunchest champions of the non-illusionistic symbolic theatre in the West was Vsevolod Meyerhold, who had earlier been a disciple of the realist Konstantin Stanislavski, the director as dictator. As Christine Edwards points out, 'although both men wanted the audience to be drawn into cooperative activity with the actors, Stanislavski was eager that they should forget artificiality of the emotional experience and even the fact that they were in a theatre, while Meyerhold did everything to make both actors and audience aware of the theatricality of the situation.'<sup>6</sup> Meyerhold's Stylized Theatre has many features in common with forms of classical Indian theatre such as Koodiyattam (which had, incidentally, preserved for centuries the plays of Bhasa in their regular repertory as anonymous works until the discovery of the Trivandrum Plays in 1912). As in classical Indian theatre, Meyerhold's Stylized Theatre also treats the spectator as a creative participant. In Meyerhold's words, 'the stylized theatre produces a play in such



a way that the spectator is compelled to employ his imagination *creatively* in order to *fill in* those details suggested by the stage action.<sup>7</sup> He maintains that, 'thanks to stylization, we can do away with complicated stage machinery, and mount simple productions in which the actor can interpret his role free from all scenery and specifically *theatrical* properties -- free from all purely incidental trappings.'<sup>8</sup> This simplicity links Meyerhold's theatre to the ancient Indian theatre as well as to the folk theatre of India. Meyerhold also developed a style of acting independent of the written text. What he calls pre-acting closely corresponds to the improvization resorted to by the actor to establish, embellish or develop the dramatic action appropriate to the context without the aid of the text: actually, it reveals the subtext concealed within the surface text which is all that one hears in the realistic theatre. Stylization thus guarantees the freedom of the performer in both Meyerhold and classical Indian theatre. Edward Braun, commenting on Meyerhold's early search for new forms, says: 'As well as corroborating his own rejection of naturalism and his efforts to reveal the hidden "sub-text" of a play, it opened his eyes to the significance of the proscenium stage, the lessons to be learnt from the oriental theatre in the use of rhythmical movement, and the inherent contradiction between the two-dimensional scenic backcloth and the three-dimensional figure of the actor.'<sup>9</sup> Meyerhold's use of statuesque plasticity in preference to the techniques of illusion is yet another parallelism between his theatre and classical Indian theatre.

The epic theatre of Bertold Brecht is also a theatre of Contra-Reality, a term used by Siegfried Melchinger to refer to the fictive world set up by the artist-in-revolt in opposition to the actual world. Melchinger says:

'Epic', in the sense that Brecht uses it, is to be understood as the negation of 'dramatic' in the sense in which that word is used to describe the last phase of the middle-class illusionistic drama. It incorporates two types of attack: 1. against the act-divided play, and 2. against the dramatization (usual meaning: filling with excitement) of events and dialogue.<sup>10</sup>

Classical Indian drama is often episodic and narrative in structure, and does not always try to build up a climax as Aristotelian drama does. Brecht did not support the idea of *Einfuehlung* or empathy. Nor did he perceive any identification between the actor and the character on the one hand, and between the spectator and the character



ter on the other hand. Catharsis or contentment was not the final goal he had. As Reiss Hans points out, 'the spectator should continuously be reminded that he is seeing a representation of an imaginary action only, and that he should continuously be exhorted to regard what is happening with a sense of critical awareness so that he does not become absorbed in the performance of the play.'<sup>11</sup> This awareness of a distance Brecht calls *Verfremdung* or V-Effect or Alienation. Melchinger says:

From the standpoint of theatrical history, this is all part of a return to the pre-illusionistic theater, in which the theatrical element had not yet been made suspect by the axiom of naturalness. Epic theater, as Brecht defined it, was the Chinese, the India, and partly also the Elizabethan theater.<sup>12</sup>

A positive application of this non-identification between the actor and the character he bodies forth is to be found in the Koodiyattam-Kathakali style of *Ekaharya* or the transformation of one actor into many characters in succession. This is made possible by *a-satmikarana* or absence of empathy. The same actor has to render the different persons or beings involved in the same action. In the words of Oscar Budel, 'the actor's business is not very different from that of an eye-witness of a traffic accident, who demonstrates to a quickly gathering crowd how the accident, of which he was the sole witness, occurred. With Brecht, the anti-Stanislawski *par excellence*, the actor has become, then, a teacher with a pointer, a *philologus in actu*; he is not King Lear, but he "demonstrates" King Lear.'<sup>13</sup> In Indian classical theatre too, the actor-character relationship is kept loose; one may see Bhima carrying the stool on which he is to be seated; the make-believe is deliberate, discontinuous, and relaxed. The non-dramatic nature of the stage presentation of the plot is what distinguishes Indian drama from pre-modern Western drama, especially of the well-made type. Discussing Brecht's theory, John Willet says: 'This is the basic meaning of "Epic" even in Brecht's use of the term: a sequence of incidents or events, narrated without artificial restrictions as to time, place or relevance to a formal "plot".'<sup>14</sup> What Brecht has said about Chinese acting applies equally well to the *angika abhinaya* of the classical Indian actor:

Traditional Chinese acting also knows the alienation effect and applies it most subtly. It is well known that the Chinese theatre uses a lot of symbols. Thus a general will carry little pennants on his shoulder, corresponding to the number of regiments under his





A ritual play based on the theme of Kali : Mudi yettu.



h Tullal related to the ritual dance drama Padayani.



Ritual dance/drama with folk elements : Theyyam.

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command. Poverty is shown by patching the silken costumes with irregular shapes of different colours, likewise silken, to indicate that they have been mended. Characters are distinguished by particular masks, i.e. simply by painting. Certain gestures of the two hands signify the forcible opening of a door, etc. The stage itself remains the same, but articles of furniture are carried in during the action. All this has long been known, and cannot very well be exported. It is not all that simple to break with the habit of assimilating a work of art as a whole. But this has to be done if just one of a large number of effects is to be singled out and studied. The alienation effect is achieved in the Chinese theatre in the following way.

Above all, the Chinese artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched. This immediately removes one of the European stage's characteristic illusions. The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place. A whole elaborate European stage technique, which helps to conceal the fact that the scenes are so arranged that the audience can view them in the easiest way, is thereby made unnecessary. The actors openly choose those positions which will best show them off to the audience, just as if they were *acrobats*. A further means is that the artist observes himself. Thus if he is representing a cloud, perhaps, showing its unexpected appearance, its soft and strong growth, its rapid yet gradual transformation, he will occasionally look at the audience as if to say: isn't it just like that? At the same time he also observes his own arms and legs, adducing them, testing them and perhaps finally approving them. An obvious glance at the floor, so as to judge the space available to him for his act, does not strike him as liable to break the illusion. In this way the artist separates mime (showing observation) from gesture (showing a cloud), but without detracting from the latter, since the body's attitude is reflected in the face and is wholly responsible for its expression. At one moment the expression is of well-managed restraint; at another, of utter triumph. The artist has been using his countenance as a blank sheet, to be inscribed by the gest of the body.<sup>15</sup>

Although this quotation appears already too long, the entire essay



'Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting' is worth quoting not only because it is in my view the clearest exposition of the epic theatre as well as the A-effect, but also because even in minute details it corresponds to what I have seen in Koodiyattam and Kathakali: both the performance of the actors and the behaviour of the spectators. And it is quite possible that it is equally true of Ankey Nat or Yatra or Bhavai or Yakshagana too.

Antonin Artaud is one of the most influential leaders of the experimental theatre in the West. and, as Eric Sellin has pointed out, 'the two greatest influences on Artaud's dramatic theories were ancient, Mexican culture and the oriental theatre, the one solar, the other lunar. The latter has generally been thought to be the keystone in the structure of Artaud's theoretical writing, but the interest in and research on Mexican culture may date back to as early as 1932-33, or only one or two years after he witnessed the 1931 Balinese dance performance that had such an impact on his ideas.'<sup>16</sup> Like Brecht Artaud also rejected the Aristotelian theory of drama, but while Brecht wanted his audience to critically watch a performance using the tools of reason and analysis, Artaud's approach was surrealistic. This shows that Artaud is closer to the ritual and folk theatre of India than to the classical one. The rejection of illusionism is shared by him; he also seems to put more emphasis on dance and rhythm than on speech and plot. This is what we find in the Indian folk theatre: there is a lot of cruelty and violence freely displayed in the folk theatre. The ritual theatre, such as Teyyam, Padayani, and Mudi yettu, presents superhuman characters from the past or the *puranas* and the legends: several of them deal with gruesome stories of death, murder, and cruelty. The plays based on the legend of Kali, sometimes identified in the folk imagination as the goddess of small pox, are performed in the open air, often in the vicinity of temples or shrines. Artaud had learnt about the treatment of forces of destruction in Hinduism and once he wrote: 'In India there are worshippers of Shiva, "the destroyer", and of Vishnu, "the conservator". However, destruction is a transforming force. Life maintains its continuity by means of the transformation of the appearances of being.'<sup>17</sup> In his book *The Theatre and Its Double* he reveals the great influence exerted on him by the oriental theatre. Martin Esslin says:

The theatre, as seen by Artaud in *The Theatre and its Double*, is essentially a religious ritual the content, the underlying myth of



which is the theatre itself; that is, the theatre defined as an assembly of human beings striving to establish contact with the profound mainsprings of their own being, the dark forces of physical emotion which lie beyond the trivialities of their everyday existence. The theatre enables them to experience the full reality of these emotions without involving them in the irreversible life situations in which alone experiences of such shattering power could otherwise be lived through. And by making the full force of a full emotional life, the whole gamut of human suffering and joy again active in multitudes of human beings, the theatre could change their basic attitude to life and institutions, their ways of thinking, their entire consciousness and thus transform society and the world.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps it is in Kathakali that we find a form of theatre which combines the classical, the ritual and the folk elements. Several Kathakali plays are concerned with crime and violence, many of them containing battles and fights and killings. Fernau Hall, in a perceptive study of Noh, Kabuki, and Kathakali, highlights the element of horror in a play about the killing of Duryodhana, and says:

The horror of the scene in which Raudra-Bhima tears out the entrails of Dussasana and covers himself with red liquid representing blood would have seemed quite normal to English Elizabethan audiences (which were used to such devices) but was a new experience to Western audiences today. On the other hand it was in spirit very much in line with recent developments in the Western theatre inspired by the writings of Antonin Artaud (himself much influenced by Eastern dance-drama), and the Kathakali scene took its place very naturally on a stage which had seen the supreme achievements of the 'Theatre of Cruelty': Peter Brook's production of a play by Peter Weiss commonly known as *Marat-Sade*. (Here blood was shown symbolically by pouring buckets of red fluid into a hole in the stage.)<sup>19</sup>

Among those who have followed in the footsteps of Artaud are Peter Brook, Jean-Louis Barrault, and Jerzy Grotowski. M. Christopher Byrski, in his article 'Grotowski and the Indian Tradition', has made a special study of the parallelisms between traditional Indian theatre and



the work of Grotowski. He is of the view that there is no direct dependence between the research undertaken at the Wrocław Laboratory Theatre of Grotowski and the Indian theatrical tradition. Grotowski produced Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, where the written text of the play was no more than a score for the director. He tried to use the yoga technique for training young actors, as a course in psycho-physiological discipline. Byrski says:

The third and the last point of direct contact between Grotowski's work and the Indian theatrical tradition is the sphere of gesture. The Laboratory Theatre came in touch with the Kathakali performers somewhere in Europe -- probably in Yugoslavia. But this encounter became meaningful only after a pupil of Grotowski and later on his collaborator, Eugenio Barba, an Italian, had been to India. Barba studied during his rather short period of stay in India, the Kathakali technique and after his return to Poland he tried to impart to actors of the Laboratory Theatre some elements of the actor's training taken from India .... And although Grotowski holds that . . . the type of training for the facial musculature used by the actor from the classical Indian theatre, Kathakali is appropriate and useful, nevertheless a different view finally prevails namely that which stresses spontaneity of gesture, despite that elsewhere Grotowski holds in connection with oriental theatre that spontaneity and discipline do not weaken themselves, and are the source of acting that glows.<sup>20</sup>

There are no doubt important differences between the theatre of Grotowski and classical Indian theatre, especially in their approaches, but their goals are often similar. As pointed out by Byrski, both consider the theatre as a confrontation between the performer and the spectator. The presence of a mythical base enables the Indian spectator to turn this encounter into a kind of identification. The only myth the Western actor has, it is said, is his living body. Both try to achieve *sadharanikarana* or universalization. Both are discriminative or selective about their audience; its size does not matter, but its quality does. Both aim at liberation or transcendence on the part of the actor. What Grotowski says about the actor outgrowing the stereotype and emerging into an archetype is true of the Indian classical actor too. The elaborate system of training for the actor as visualized by Grotowski has a parallel in the training programme of the classical theatre of India. The

purpose of this is to raise the level of aesthetic experience. Grotowski says: 'The actor's accomplishment consists of a transcendence of the half measures of daily life, of the internal conflict between body and soul, intellect and feelings, physiological pleasures and spiritual aspirations. For a moment the actor finds himself outside semi-engagement and conflict with characterize us in our daily life.'<sup>21</sup>

Richard Schechner's name is closely associated with the idea of an environmental theatre, which he says he has come across in many parts of the world. But his approach is from a fresh angle. He says: 'My studies of anthropology, social psychology, psychoanalysis, and gestalt therapy are the bases of my belief that *performance theory* is a social science, not a branch of aesthetics. I reject aesthetics.'<sup>22</sup> Schechner's concept of the theatre as a social event is naturally related to (a) the use of open space, (b) active audience participation, (c) the role of the shaman, (d) theatrical experience as therapy, and (e) group activity. Most of these may not apply to the classical theatre of India, which is often an arranged performance before an elite audience. But all of them may be found in the ritual and folk/ tribal theatre in all parts of India. Ramlila, Teyyam, Padayani, Tamasha and Yatra are examples of environmental theatre where in the open space, the entire local population actively involve themselves in the collective happening, and passing through various degrees of ecstasy and excitement achieve a total cleansing or release from tension or therapy, as it were. Unfortunately there is no standard theoretical work on the folk theatre comparable to *Natya Sastra*, and therefore one cannot make comparisons on a theoretical basis. But there is no doubt that in a folk theatre there are no passive spectators (except possibly a modern research scholar come to study it with camera and tape recorder). The spectators are actors as well, and are full beneficiaries of the performance which is a communal ritual, either secular or religious.

To sum up, the three main types of traditional Indian theatre share common features with the diverse experiments that have tried to take European theatre away from its post-Renaissance realistic moorings. The stylized theatre, the epic theatre, the theatre of cruelty, the theatre of poverty, and the environmental theatre are developments which have clear parallels in the three forms of traditional Indian theatre, the classical, the ritual, and the folk/tribal. Both have common features which can also be found in other Asian theatres like the Chinese, the Japanese and the Indonesian.



# THEATRE

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- 17    Ibid., p.98.
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- 22    Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theater* (New York: Hawthorn Books , 1973), p.vii.

# The Road Revisited: An Analysis of *Pather Panchali*

Meenakshi Mukherjee

**F**IRST PUBLISHED in 1929, *Pather Panchali* was known outside Bengal only after 1956 when a film of the same title, made by Satyajit Ray, based on parts of the original novel won an international award. Perhaps as an indirect result of the excellence of the film, the novel was translated into English<sup>1</sup> and French in the sixties. The stature of the original novel by Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay (Banerji), however, is in no way dependent on its celebrated filmic transformation, and its place was secure in the tradition of Bengali fiction long before the film was made.

*Pather Panchali* and its sequel *Aparajito* (published in 1931) form a two-part *bildungsroman* tracing the growth of a village boy named Apu. In the first part the world contained in Apu's consciousness expands from the confines of the courtyard of his house and the bamboo grove beyond it to the margins of Apu's village, Nischindipur, and then beyond it to the next village, then to another, and by the end of the volume to Banaras. In the second part, which is larger in scope, the process of expansion of Apu's consciousness continues until he leaves India from the port of Calcutta on a ship bound for South America. But unlike the familiar *bildungsroman* which has a linear progression, here the progress follows a pattern of concentric circles. As when a pebble is thrown into water the smaller circles thus caused gradually merge into the larger ones, in Bibhutibhusan's novel the hero, instead of leaving behind one phase of his life and proceeding to the next, incorporates each phase into the next one and makes a larger inclusive entity.



There are two motifs in *Pather Panchali*, and their interrelationship forms another basic design. While Apu's imaginative life is constantly moving outwards, his sister Durga never leaves the village mentally or physically. Although they grow up together in close emotional attachment, the brother and the sister embody two opposing responses to life. Durga experiences life basically through sensory perceptions, most often through touch and taste. Her imagination is earthbound, her instincts make her sympathize with the weak and the persecuted (the neglected old aunt, the uncouth street dog, the neighbour's wife who is beaten by her husband). Apu is no less attached to the wild fruits and flowers of Nischindipur than his sister, but to him the village is only a take-off point. Both spatially and imaginatively, his curve is outward bound.

The passage below illustrates the difference in their responses. The children are collecting water chestnut from a pond; the fruits are just outside their reach; Durga is knee-deep in water and has asked Apu to hold on to her sari so that she does not slide into deeper water. Then,

A yellow bird perching on the top of the moynakanta tree swayed the leaves and whistled an unfamiliar tune.

Apu looked up and asked,

'What is the bird, didi?'

'Forget the bird, Apu. Hold on to the sari, tight.

Don't let me slip.'\*

Apu is forever being distracted by things beyond his reach, forever losing concentration in the immediate object by flights of fancy. His imagination gets fired by trifles -- like a stick bent at a particular angle, the possession of which suddenly transforms him into a heroic character like Arjun or Karna. Durga feels nothing but amusement for such absurd games.

Apu and Durga can be regarded as two aspects of man's relationship with nature: Apu soaring high, his imagination taking him far from where his feet are planted, while he continues to derive strength from the grass and weeds of Nischindipur, the village being the centre of the concentric arcs that will chart his flight; Durga remaining tethered to the concrete objects around her, rooted to the universe of palpable reality. She collects shiny seeds of wild fruit for their smooth feel, green mangoes for their sharp taste. She hoards bits of a broken mirror, beads from a string, a gold *sindur*-box (this, in fact, she steals), quite indiscriminately and hides her treasures in a broken toy-chest. This toy-chest

\* Unless stated otherwise, quotations in the text represent my own translation from the original.

serves a key-function in the novel. When, halfway through the story, Durga's mother throws away the toy-chest and its contents in a fit of anger, it is like a ritual ending of Durga's childhood.

In the society which this novel depicts, marriage for a girl is her initiation into adulthood. The passing of Durga's childhood coincides with strange premonitions of departure. She begins to look at familiar sights -- the bamboo grove behind the house, the road under the *gab* tree, the ferry ghat of the river -- somewhat sadly. At this point in the novel, like Durga, the reader tends to relate this feeling to the separation from Nischindipur that is bound to happen when she gets married. Durga's own thoughts of marriage, combining both anticipation and apprehension, refer to an archetypal feeling -- an amalgam of joy with sadness -- celebrated in marriage songs in different parts of India. In Bengal, where until the early decades of the twentieth century a girl used to be married off before she attained puberty, marriage figures largely even in nursery rhymes and children's songs. This separation-through-marriage motif is so insistent in Bengali culture that the entire ritual of Durga Puja, the annual autumn festival that is central to the life of Bengal, can be seen as an enactment of a folk myth where the goddess Durga as a married daughter comes home to her parents for a few days, and the joy of these few days is invariably tinged with the sadness associated with her impending departure. When at the end of these few days the clay image of the goddess is immersed in the river, the sad music reflects the mood of the occasion.

Durga in the novel *Pather Panchali* is made of the earth, water and air of the village, and it seems inherent in the logic of the novel that she has to be immersed in the waters of Nischindipur before the novel can move forward. The Bengali poet Sudhindranath Datta (1910-59) once suggested an ecological link between Bengali's climate and culture; the fact that the people of Bengal did not build stone temples and, instead, 'worshipped clay images which, once the day was done, went back to rest in the beds of super-abundant rivers and ubiquitous marshes' could be related to the wet climate and alluvial soil of Bengal.<sup>2</sup> The girl Durga in the novel, a barefoot, tangle-haired waif, who in a way embodies the spirit of the place, also goes back to its elements when her day is over.

Marriage as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood is pre-empted by Durga's death. In her death on a stormy night there is per-



haps an unconscious echo of a central metaphor in Vaishnav poetry where Radha equates death and union with Krishna. Edwin Gerow has observed that Durga's death is inevitable because 'a free spirit cannot "grow up", cannot accept or come to terms with her concrete social character, which is the prison of adulthood.'<sup>3</sup> Although Durga has been conditioned from childhood to perform rites for obtaining a good husband, although like all girls of her age and time she has been taught to look forward to marriage as the glittering finale towards which everything moves, her first reaction on seeing a cart carrying a new bride to her husband's home is one of terror:

'If I go away from here leaving my parents and Apu behind, will I ever be allowed to come back?' She could not conceive that she will have to leave for ever this garden, this grove of basak flowers, this copper-coloured cow, the shade of her favourite jackfruit tree, the smell of dry leaves and the path to the river.

For her the thought of marriage is a thought of loss and separation. In this novel she does not get married partly because, as Edwin Gerow suggests, her wild spirit cannot be trapped by the fetters of adulthood without losing its essence, and partly because she embodies the spirit of Nischindipur and thus cannot be separated from this setting. Had she lived longer, the fetters as well as the separation would have become inevitable. As Apu grows up his horizon, both physical and mental, widens while Durga's world closes in. There are more and more things she is forbidden to do as she grows up and as society attempts to curb an untamed spirit, which is almost identifiable with the unkempt overgrown bushes and swamps of Nischindipur – or with Vishalakshi Debi, the neglected local deity of the village. No one in the village paid much attention to Vishalakshi; her temple was uncared for, the goddess nearly forgotten – yet she was part of Apu's daydreams. Durga too receives abuse and ill-treatment from most people in the village and she is for ever getting into trouble for stealing fruits and beads. Yet she is Apu's most vital connection with the sensory world of nature, from which he is gradually separated as he grows up. In this indirect identification between Durga and Vishalakshi Debi a process of mythicization may be seen at work.

The railroad and the train that appear as recurrent motifs in the novel also serve to define the difference between the roles of the brother and the sister. During their first abortive attempt to see the railway tracks it is Durga who takes the initiative. Under the pretext of looking

for the lost calf of the red cow, the two children run in the direction of the railway tracks but end up losing their way in the rice fields. Durga never manages to reach the railway tracks which, in her and Apu's childish minds, define the boundary of the familiar world. Later Apu, on his way to a neighbouring village with his father, sees with amazement the railway embankment and the telegraph lines, but he has not yet seen the railway train. When Durga, in between her spells of high fever, asks Apu, 'Will you take me to see the train one day?', already the leadership has passed from her to him, and Apu promises that he will. After Durga's death, when Apu actually has the opportunity of travelling by train, his excitement is not unmixed with regret. He sees from the train the vision of a sad girl standing alone under the *jamun* tree at the corner where the tracks curve away from the village. This to him is the final desertion because, so long as they were in Nischindipur, even after she died, Durga was present in every leaf and pebble.

This sadness of departure and separation is one of the dominant moods of the novel, and it has created certain problems of translation into English. *Karuna rasa* is the most difficult *rasa* to render into English and, when attempted, runs the danger of being considered sentimental. In the English version of *Pather Panchali* the translators have had to guard against something that the author of the original is totally unself-conscious about, because sentimentality, even when it falls short of *karuna rasa*, is not necessarily an inferior feeling in the Indian context. The English dictionary definition of 'sentimental' as 'emotion in excess of the object that generates it' can easily be countered by Dr Aziz's well-known quip in *A Passage to India*: 'Is emotion a sack of potatoes that you measure it at so much for a pound?'

Herein lies one of the basic critical problems that the study of *Pather Panchali* raises. Is the impact of the novel culture-bound or does it go deeper than its regional and local context and touch a bedrock of universal human experience? The answer to this problem at this stage can only be empirical. From the experience of teaching this novel at an American university as well as at an Indian university – and neither experience was long enough to support generalizations -- I have found two kinds of responses from students. American students – and Indian students with a predominantly western cultural orientation -- tend to react sharply to the sociological aspects of Indian life, noting the poverty and deprivation that led to Durga's death and Apu's displacement;



whereas the more indigenous Indian students react more to the human aspects, noting not so much the poverty which in any case is a ubiquitous Indian presence, but Apu's sense of joy and wonder at life.

Wonder is the dominant quality in Apu's perception of reality. The tracing of his ever-widening universe begins with his first outing with his father at the age of five. The sight of the first actual rabbit outside the alphabet book, the taste of wild berries, the mystery of the ruined house of the indigo planter, the temptation to touch the bright *alkushi* fruit not knowing that this will result in an itch -- a variety of sensations overwhelm the child eager for experience. As on the first page of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, Apu's first perceptions of the unfamiliar world are recounted in terms of visual, tactile, aural and other sensory details -- all superimposed with a pristine sense of wonder. About a hundred pages and several years later Apu's father admonishes him for being 'open-mouthed' all the time, and this open-mouthed or wide-eyed excitement continues through Apu's first experience of seeing a *jatra* performance, his first 'scientific' experiment of flying in the air, his first night in the train looking out onto the moon-washed fields and passing mysterious railway stations.

The spatial movement towards an ever larger world is accompanied by variegated emotional experiences -- fear of Aturi the lonely old woman whom the village children thought of as a witch; his first childish sorrow, his first disappointment; quarrels and reconciliations; *mana* and *abhimana* with his mother; his first venture in smoking and his gambling with cowrie shells; his play acting; his friendships with other children and with an old vaishnav. Above all, his growth is seen in terms of the expanding world of imagination wherein the books he reads blend with real life experiences to form one composite whole. Local legends, folk tales, *Mahabharata* episodes, novels, *jatra* performances, are all grist to the mill of his restless imagination. Naresh Guha has shown in detail how the uneven and improvised quality of Apu's reading is of central importance in his life.<sup>4</sup> We should also note that life and literature, reality and fancy, are not kept apart in his mind. The oceans and continents he reads about in geography books get absorbed in his desire to be a sailor, and the story he reads about the sunken Spanish ship off the coast of Porto Plata becomes part of a lifelong dream. At the end of *Aparajito*, when he is about to embark on his voyage towards South America, he tells himself that he is at last going to find that sunken treasure, reminding

us of the continuity of his dreams and his ability to relate dream and reality – the written word to actual experience. The blue-eyed girl named Joan in the province of Lorraine who saved France, Grace Darling, Zulaikha, the sugar fields of Martinique, Columbus' adventures – all become as much part of the boy's imaginative awareness of the world as the cruel story of Karna's death or Romeshchandra Dutt's novels about Shivaji's triumph or Rajput valour.

In this aspect of *Pather Panchali* – the education of Apu – a very significant pattern reveals itself when we note the result of colonial education at its most fruitful. Where it does not alienate, it can integrate wonderfully. The education of Apu can be contrasted with the education of Mohan Biswas in V.S. Naipaul's novel, *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), which is another *bildungsroman* tracing the growth of another poor brahman boy in another British colony.<sup>5</sup> Both the boys get their education in an eclectic fashion reading whatever books are available to them, yet quite surprisingly they seem to have read some of the same books. This may be because of uniformity in the pattern of education in British colonies. However, the net result is quite different in either case. Because Apu is securely rooted, he has no problem in reaching out to another culture without losing his own moorings; whereas Mr Biswas belongs to an uprooted social milieu (of Indians in the West Indies) and education for him becomes a process of alienation from his life. Mohan Biswas's own life is unsuccessful but he lives vicariously through his son, and his son's final departure to England and gradual snapping of all bonds with Trinidad seems to be the logical culmination of this process of estrangement. Apu too leaves India at the end of *Aparajito*, but there is something in the circular movement of the novel which assures that he will inevitably return.

The cyclic movement of the novel has sometimes been mistaken as formlessness, and the English translation (as well as the French version) have tried to improve the form of the novel by truncating the original. In the Bengali original of *Pather Panchali*, the first section (6 chapters) deals with incidents prior to Apu's birth; the second and the major section (23 chapters) describes Apu's childhood and boyhood in Nischindipur; the third section (6 chapters) takes Apu out of the village to a larger world. This last section has been omitted by Clark and Mukherjee in their translation entitled *The Song of the Road*. The translators justify the exclusion by regarding this part to be extraneous to the requirements of the novel's formal integrity.



But Bibhutibhusan's narrative is conditioned, perhaps unconsciously, by a very different concept of time and of aesthetic form than what underlie Western realistic fiction. The word *panchali* of the original title refers to a devotional narrative song which continues for a long stretch of time without any perceptible climax, and where the story does not follow a rigidly sequential order. Quite often *puranic* stories and other tales in the oral tradition have this cyclic form, wherein the events come back full circle to the initial state of equilibrium without registering any perceptible change on the axis of time. We may recall in this connection Mircea Eliade's distinction between mythic time and historical time -- one being circular in movement, the other being linear. The linear concept can be related to historicity, also with realism of the Western variety and a certain formal structure of the novel. In the mythic or eternal time a cosmic rhythm embraces man and the universe in a cyclical repetition. The seasons of the year are an aspect of this principle of cyclic renovation, and the renewal of generations is also part of the same process. It will be simplistic to assume that a novel written in the twentieth century can embody in totality the time structure of myth or folk narrative, but *Pather Panchali* often reminds us of a rhythm of time that is far from linear.

Chapters in the novel are noticeably punctuated by reference to changes of season, and Apu's growing up is marked in terms of the summers, rains and winters he goes through. The festivals, so closely connected with the seasons, are also measures of time. The autumn festival of Durga Puja marks the clearing of skies after months of heavy rain, and the Charak festival is associated with the onset of summer. For village children these two festivals are the highpoints of the year. Durga dies during a particularly wild season of storm and rain. As the first tumult of grief dies down the skies clear after the monsoons. The sad-sweet music of Durga Puja can now be heard, and her father returns after months of absence with new clothes for the festival only to find that Durga is no more. Apu's final departure from the village is in the month of Vaisakh, just after the Charak festival. This chapter winds up all the loose threads of Apu's childhood. Aturi the witch dies on the day of Charak ending one phase of irrational childhood terror; the music heard during the festival reminds Apu of other years when, lying securely next to his sister at night, he used to hear the same tunes; the glistening of coconut leaves in the moonlight evokes memories that tie Apu irrevocably to the place he is about to leave; Apu discovers the lost

golden *sindur*-box his sister had been accused of stealing. In this chapter his whole childhood is gathered up and given back to him as it were.

But even as his life moves forward, the details of his childhood do not simply fade away and drop out of his life. The meaning of the novel is not conveyed by the sequence of events, but by clusters of images and experiences even though they appear at different moments in the story. Sometimes a new experience echoes an older one (Durga, Gulki, the old brahman kathak, they all evoke the same compassion in Apu), sometimes the old images are relived in memory in a new situation (Apu's reverie, while he is in the city, of Vishalakshi Debi), and sometimes the author himself steps in to relate the present moment to a future not as yet known to the reader or to Apu. This aspect of continuity is illustrated in a memorable passage at the end of the second section of *Pather Panchali*. The passage occurs when Apu's train is steaming out of Nischindipur at night and evoking kaleidoscopic images of his childhood. He silently swears to his sister that he will not forget her:

It was true. He had not forgotten and he did not forget. Later in his life he became so well acquainted with the earth and its girdle of oceans and tresses of blue; when his whole body thrilled to the speed of movement; when from moment to moment, as he stood on the deck of a ship at sea, the unearthly beauties of the blue sky flashed new on his sight; when the blue slope of a mountain wreathed in the vineyards faded from distance to distance and vanished beyond the dim bounds of the ocean's horizon; when the sweet siren melody from some far off shore, faintly discerned through a concealing haze, came to his ears like the voice of the lord of song; and at all times like them, his memory took him back to a stormy monsoon night, to a dark room in an old house and the ceaseless noise of the rain, when the daughter of a poor village family spoke to him from her bed of sickness and said, 'Apu, when I get better, will you take me to see a train?' The distant signals of Majherpara station became fainter and fainter, then finally he could see them no more.<sup>6</sup>

Apu leaves India to be closely acquainted with the ocean-girdled earth only at the end of *Aparajito*, but at the moment of parting from Nishchindipur the author projects the novel forward to another stage of his journey and backward to the memory of Durga emphasizing the contiguity of all events, the irrelevance of linear or historical sequential development of time.



In *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito* the seasons change, childhood passes into adolescence and youth, but time never seems to be sharply fragmented. At the end of the two-part novel there is a kind of circular return to the beginning, when Apu's childhood is reenacted through his son Kajal's response to Nishchindipur. 'The child's immediate and precipient penetration of the very sense of things'<sup>7</sup> is situated in a kind of ahistorical timeless continuum; Apu's childhood blends with his son's and while Apu leaves the country the cycle of growth continues in Nishchindipur.

Just as imagination and reality synthesize in the composite whole of Apu's experience, so too past and present in this novel merge in a seamless web. The pre-Apu chapters of the first section are a necessary link with the past, where the geneology of the Roy family is traced, emphasizing continuity. We learn that Apu's father Harihar and Harihar's father both lacked practical wisdom and both were poets and dreamers. In the old aunt Indir's reverie, past and present blended freely and she could weep over the death of a boy who passed away fifty years ago, as if the sorrow was a recent one. In the ruins of the Bengal Indigo concern, at the outskirts of the village there was one tombstone which still stood unbroken:

Here lies Edwin Lermor

The Only Son of John and Mrs Lermor

Born May 13, 1853, Died April 27, 1860

The dead child had passed into history, but the wild *sondal* tree which shaded the grave still showered its abundant yellow flowers on it. Apu's interest in this grave of a child who was the same age as him links the past and present in an immutable flow. On a hot summer afternoon when Apu is forced to stay indoors he explores the old wooden chests, the wicker baskets, the huge utensils under the bed whose musty smell makes him aware of a time when he was not in this world but these things had been present. On the top shelf of their cupboard Apu finds stacks of old manuscripts written by his grandfather whose crumbling pages contain a mystery just outside young Apu's reach. This sense of mystery and wonder that Apu never loses gives the novel a timelessness that cannot be found in novels defined along temporal lines alone. After his sister's death Apu leaves Nishchindipur; his father dies in Benares, but the central motif of the novel continues to be that of cyclic regeneration which is captured in a Sanskrit verse repeated more than once:

*Kale varshatu parjanya prithvi shashya-shalini  
lokaah santu niramayah.*

(If the rains come in time and the earth  
is green again, the well-being of the  
people is renewed.)

In Benares when Apu's father recites *puranic* stories on the bank of the Ganga he always ends his recital with this verse. Sung in the *purvi raga* these lines become the leitmotif of the Benares section. Apu listens casually to this verse as he plays on the river side, but he grows so attached to it that one day he asks his father to write it out for him. Later when Apu's father dies, after the cremation and the rites are over and Apu takes the ritual dip in the cold river, this is the verse that keeps echoing in his mind. Overwhelmed by the day's events and shivering in his wet clothes Apu imagines that he can hear his father's voice somewhere reciting the familiar song of benediction obliterating the image of the defeated man and perpetuating the memory of a man affirming the regeneration of life. Not completion, but continuity is the essence of the novel - and this verse highlights it in the third section.

The third section of the novel ends when Apu reaches the nadir of humiliation in the city where his mother serves as a cook. The slavery and enclosed space of this section are counterpoints to the wild freedom of Nishchindipur. In a flood of nostalgia Apu remembers all the details of Nishchindipur specially because return seems impossible now. He thinks of the magical afternoons by the forest, the yellow bird, the lemon tree, and feels that the sorrow of separation is unbearable.

The movement from the village to the city and the consequent nostalgia for a lost paradise which *Pather Panchali* deals with only incidentally, has turned out in the next half century to be one of the major themes in novels written in the Indian languages. The historical situation of Bengal specially, where partition of the country in 1947 resulted in the loss of a large part of rural Bengal, has been specially responsible for the recurrence of this theme in Bengali novels. Nishchindipur in this context has almost become a symbolic embodiment of the lost country of childhood. *Pather Panchali* gains a retrospective significance for having been the most lyrical evocation of this theme of the wrench of man from nature. Yet Nishchindipur is not merely a symbol, it is also a realistically presented village with a specific landscape and particula-



rized vegetation. Although realism is not the basic mode of the novel, every leaf and fruit has been minutely evoked. One can almost touch Durga's tangled hair and taste the sour mangoes. The central focus is not poverty which is a familiar background to life almost all over the country, but the unique sensibility of the child protagonist and his ability to invest the ordinary with a glowing quality of newness.

Krishna Baldev Vaid's Hindi novel *Uska Bachpan* (1958; translated into English by the author as *Steps in Darkness*) also has a child as a central character, but the world as perceived by Beero is altogether a different place from Apu's world. Beero lives in an urban slum which gives him neither physical nor mental space. The persistent motifs are of smoke and darkness, culminating in a climax of claustrophobia at the end with Beero's attempt at strangulation. His world is drawn in monochrome – in different shades of black and grey -- as against the lush colours of grass, sky, fruits and flowers seen through Apu's eyes in *Pather Panchali*. Quite unaware of *Pather Panchali* (the novel was not even translated when Vaid wrote *Uska Bachpan* in 1958), Vaid has presented in Beero an exact antithesis of Apu. Apu never loses his childhood even when he grows up. Beero has never fully been a child -- his weariness and premature wisdom are alternated by spells of pure innocence which do not last long. Nishchindipur seems idyllic in its superabundance of vegetation, compared to Beero's world where there is nothing to soften the squalor. Even if in Beero's world the texture of life is magnified as among children everywhere (one remembers how Durga finds a special beetle on the road, identifies it and sits down to say a prayer), Beero's gaze is fastened to the stagnant festering ditchwater and the hornet buzzing over it, on the big fat louse about to drop from the hair, or the peeling layers of his grandmother's quilt. What is common in spite of the many differences is the amoral and often merely sensory apprehension of life, the ability to live in a world of imagination and reality simultaneously that both Apu and Beero share. Apu is poor but his poverty is softened by the warmth of human attachment and by the unlimited freedom to wander. Beero's world is circumscribed not merely in its poverty, but in its deprivation of emotional security. Apu is not particularly aware of his poverty. When he has *halwa* in the house of a rich disciple of his father's, he wonders why the *halwa* his mother makes never tastes as good. He thinks with tenderness of his mother who probably does not know how *halwa* ought to be made. Beero, on the other hand, is acutely conscious of his poverty every waking moment of his

life and fantasizes about the happiness he would achieve for his mother if he could earn a lot of money – when the plate of food would be so crowded that there would hardly be any place left for the onion slices. That to him would be happiness, the fulfilment of a dream.

*Steps in Darkness* is a stark novel with a conscious focussing on the point of view of a slum child and his immediate perceptions. In *Pather Panchali* the central consciousness is Apu, but not consistently so. There is less conscious technical craft here, more of the unselfconscious oral narrator's skill. The two novels stand at opposite poles both in mood and technique even though both succeed in portraying with an unerring precision the consciousness of a child.

Another novel that can be set against *Pather Panchali* both thematically and technically, is Manik Bandopadhyaya's *Putulnacher Itikatha* (1936; translated into English as *The Puppet's Tale*). Even though the setting in both the cases is rural Bengal and there is hardly ten years difference in their dates of publication the world views are totally antithetical. In Manik Bandopadhyay's novel nature is indifferent to human beings to the point of near malevolence and the cycle of seasons, instead of indicating regeneration and renewal, emphasizes seasonal diseases and mortality. Shashi the protagonist has lost his mooring both in terms of the community and his place in it as well as in terms of his integral relationship with nature. He is an example of Lukac's problematic hero alienated from his environment and confronted with the task of finding his place in the universe. Apu is never disassociated with nature, even though Naresh Guha has suggested that a distance does grow between Apu and nature. Guha sees this in terms of the recurring cycle of passionate love for, then separation from, and finally our *viraha* (inconsolable yearning, as the Vaishnavs would call it) for Universal Nature and our own childhood. Apu's world, despite its material poverty, is a benign one, rich in human warmth and imaginative wealth.<sup>8</sup> This lyrical mode contrasts with the existential mode of Shashi's perception in *Putulnacher Itikatha*; as a medical doctor, he has very few illusions about physical nature or human nature. The searing starkness of his vision encounters death, stagnation and carnal desire with equally ambivalent detachment. There is no hope here of transcendence.

Manik Bandopadhyay's doctor protagonist has been compared by Nabaneeta Deb Sen with Camus' doctor protagonist in *The Plague* (the



original of which was written about ten years after *Putulnacher Itikatha*).<sup>9</sup> One cannot think of anything in Western literature with which *Pather Panchali* can be compared. The narrative mode cannot be labelled realistic, nor is it totally lyrical or romantic. The question of whether there has been any Western influence on this work is not easy to answer. The author, like his protagonist, seems to have done a great deal of unsystematic reading of English literature. But, instead of his own sensibility being altered by such reading, it seems to have absorbed all this and yet remained essentially itself, but richer. The strength of the novel is its wholly unselfconscious evocation of a world where man has not become estranged from nature, where objective reality and the subjective world of imagination can still be part of an organic whole. The choice of a child as the central consciousness in the first part is, of course, crucial to the effect sought to be created -- and may even be the reason why the novel has withstood the passage of time during which it has often crossed linguistic boundaries.

1. Two different translations into English are now available: (i) *The Song of the Road*, trs. T. W. Clark and Tarapada Mukherjee (George Allen & Unwin, London, 1968); (ii) *Pather Panchali* (in three parts, tr. Monika Varma (Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 1973). The first is scrupulously faithful to the original, but leaves out the last six chapters. The second is a complete but somewhat free translation. The sequel, *Aparajito*, has not yet been translated into English.
2. See the piece 'Calcutta' in his *The World of Twilight* (Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1970), pp. 77-78.
3. See his 'Three Bengali Novels' in *The Literatures of India: An Introduction*, ed. Edward C. Dimock and others (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974), p. 236.
4. See his 'Afterword' in *Pather Panchali*, Part III, translated by Monika Varma.
5. For a detailed contrastive study of these two novels, see Meenakshi Mukherjee, 'The House and the Road: Two Modes of Autobiographical Fiction', in *Commonwealth Literature: Problems of Response*, ed. C. D. Narasimhaiah (Macmillan India, Madras, 1981), pp. 148-64.
6. *The Song of the Road*, op. cit., pp. 303-4.
7. Gerow, op. cit., p. 236.
8. Guha, op. cit., p. iii.
9. See her 'Two Cases of Conscience and Alienation', *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature*, XI (1973), pp. 107-23.

# There Can Be No International Art

Pranabranjan Ray

**S**OME TIME ago an American art historian and critic, Suzi Gablik toured India under the sponsorship of the United States International Communication Agency, lecturing at various art centres of the country and meeting artists and critics. She was not half as interested in seeing, as in demonstrating a thesis contained in her then recent book titled *Progress in Art*.<sup>1</sup>

The main postulate of the book, that the law of linear development from a lower stage to a higher stage is operative in art, is nothing new. Art historians of a variety of ideological persuasions, from the formalists who believe that art has a secular history totally unconnected with any other history, to historicists with sociological inclinations who believe that art is a reflection of social reality, hold that art has a developmental history more or less similar to other fields of human thought and action. There would have been no need to take these theories of unilinear progress in art seriously had these theories been *post facto* theories only, without any impact on the practice of art as such. But often a group of innovative artists come to hold the view that their works represent the epitome of progress in art. Oftener, a far large number of art practitioners come to believe that certain types of art are advanced while certain other types are backward. Thinking thus, they try to emulate this so-called advanced art. I will presently go into details about why this type of thinking holds sway, but for the moment, let us take up the missing thread about Gablik's book.



Gablik's thesis is somewhat pernicious in that she builds up a sociopsychological argument to present a formalist case and thereby tries to pre-empt opposition from both points of view. Her thesis is roughly this. Art is a mode of cognition. Cognition is never wholly sensuous or perceptual. Rather, perception itself is very much governed by conceptual pre-dispositions. Human history is a history of increasing conceptual clarity about the phenomenal world. With each step, man's perception of the phenomenal world gets changed. These gainful changes in perception-conception interdependence are not random. There is a developmental pattern in them.

As the process of cognition goes through different phases of orientation, the appearance of the phenomenal world remains, through several phases, the prime mover. In art, especially, the image of the world of appearances is paramount. Increasingly, however, man seeks the truth behind appearances, in the laws which govern relations and order arrangements. He begins to rely upon abstract mathematical laws. Conception frees itself from the bondage of appearances; perception also demands this freedom. Hence, in art as well, images of the world of appearance lose their validity.

Art becomes a reflection of the new forms of cognition. It frees itself from imagist modes; non-referential, conceptual thinking finds form in art. An art that denies appearances approximates to the kind of thought which contemplates abstract relations and abstract orders; reflecting this highest form of cognition, art becomes both freer, and emotionally neutral.

On the one hand Gablik builds her thesis on the supposed scientific findings about development of perceptual + conceptual capacities and intelligence in human individuals; on the other hand, she makes a selective review of the history of visual arts – mainly of the western world, of course.

Gablik's mentors, notably the child psychologist, Jean Piaget, came to this general theory about the development of perception and intelligence, by examining a few case histories of human development from childhood to adulthood. The data is taken from western Europe in the second half of the twentieth century. On the basis of this set of single-point-of-time data thrown up by one civilization only, namely a bour-

geois civilization with a Judaeo Christian heritage now at the stage of monopoly capitalism, these pundits build up a model of the propensities and historical development of human cognition, and they claim for it a universality. This incidentally is the same kind of universality that used to be claimed for the laws of capitalist market economy by neo-classical economists, laws which have had to be discarded even by bourgeois economists.

Gablik is a little more pretentious than her mentors. She takes purposely selected samples of western art from different periods, and, to legitimize her universalistic claims, some haphazard examples of late medieval Indian paintings. She then analyses these in their formal make-ups only. However, she claims not only universal but historical validity for her purely heuristic model. The model purports to say that the conceptual mode of representation has by stages replaced the imagist mode of representation in western art. Culminating in a line of development from Cubism through Futurism, and bifurcating into geometrical varieties of abstract art like Suprematism,<sup>a</sup> Neo-Plasticism,<sup>b</sup> Constructivism<sup>c</sup> and Hard-edge painting,<sup>d</sup> it arrives at last at what is called Conceptual art<sup>e</sup>. Since this development of western art follows exactly the supposed line of development of man's cognitive capacity and can be explained in terms of the latter, western art represents the quintessence of art history. It follows that if the arts of other lands have not yet found geometrical-abstract modes, leave alone Conceptual art, it is because the cognitive faculties of these people are still backward. The moral, presumably, is that if the artists of these lands are to prove themselves progressive, they should start contemplating dispassionately, and represent their imaginative thought in an abstract form.

Gablik's thesis is obviously unhistorical. It is necessary, however, to point out that since the turn of the century a destined universality has been claimed for a variety of geometrical-abstract art, and by persons with better credentials than Gablik: In 1912 by Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, in their manifesto-like article, *Cubism*; by Le Corbusier and Amadee Ozenfant in their 1920 article entitled *Purism*; in 1927 by Kasimir Malevich, writing on Suprematism in *The Non-Objective World*; and by Naum Gabo in an article entitled *The Constructive Idea in Art*; written in 1937. Advanced positions for their respective versions of ab-

a) See illustration 1.

b) See illustration 3.

c) See illustration 4.

d) See illustrations 6 and 7.

e) See illustrations 8 and 9.



stract art are posited by these artists on the ground that their mode represents the highest realization of the supposed *prime function* of art.

It is equally important to point out that practitioners of geometrical abstraction have themselves conceptualized different functions for art. According to Gleizes and Metzinger the function of painting is to arrange on a two-dimensional surface, lines and flat masses denoting planes which represent subjective responses to concrete retinal stimuli. 'A work of art should induce a sensation of a mathematical order, and the means of inducing this mathematical order should be sought among universal means', declared Le Corbusier and Ozenfant. To Kasimir Malevich, 'the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling . . . enduring true value of a work of art resides solely in the feeling expressed'. Naum Gabo observed, ' . . . it [Constructivism] has revealed a universal law that the elements of a visual art, such as lines, colours, shapes, possess their own forces of expression independent of any association with the external aspects of the world; that their life and action are self-conditioned psychological phenomena rooted in human nature; that those elements are not chosen by convention for any utilitarian or other reason as words and figures are, they are not merely abstract signs, but they are immediately and organically bound up with human emotions'. To Piet Mondrian art was an intellectual pursuit to build a parallel and compensatory reality.

Thus though all geometrical abstract art is built up with straight lines and angles; elliptical, oblong or parabolic curves; rectangles, squares, triangles – shapes and flat coloured masses denoting planes – it aims nevertheless at performing different functions. Contrary to what the votaries of non-historical conceptualism, like E.M. Gombrich, and historical conceptualism, like Suzi Gablik would like us to believe, there are other more important causes which govern the genesis of style in art than mere individual conceptions.

If we were to consider some cases where, in spite of similarities in conception about the function of art, styles differ and where, despite contrary conceptions about the function of art, styles show striking similarities, we would arrive at a reasonably satisfactory estimate of the supra-individual factors which govern the major stylistic preoccupations.

Take the case of similarities in conception about the function of art. In the art of different cultures and different times we occasionally find a conspicuous emphasis on formal values of art -- even at times to



1. Kasimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition*, 1914, 23 x 29 inch, Oil on canvas



2 Wassily Kandinsky, *Black Spot*, 1921, 53.9 x 47.3 inch.



3. Piet Mondrian, *Composition in Red, Yellow and Blue*, 1930, 18.9 x 18.9 inch, Oil





4. Vladimir Tatlin, *Monument to the IIIrd International*, 1919-20, Maquette in wood, iron and glass.



5. Robert Motherwell, *Elegy for the Spanish Republic*, 1954, 80 x 100 inch, Oil



6. Kenneth Noland, *Rocker*, 1958, 54.5 x 54.5 inch, Acrylic on canvas

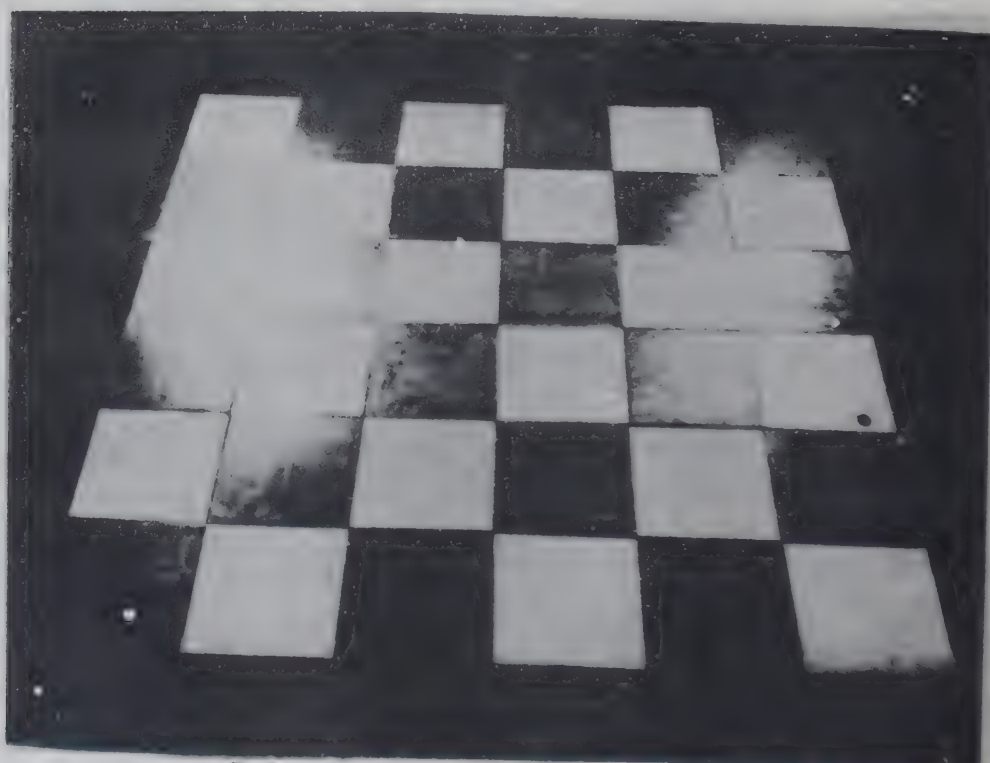


Frank Stella, *Sinjerli Variation II*, 1968, Diameter 120 inch, Fluorescent acrylic on canvas





8. Robert Morris. *Untitled*, 1969, Felt and lead.



9. Carl Andre. *Plain*, 1969, Thirty six pieces of steel and zinc each  
72 x 72 x 0.4 inch.

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the virtual exclusion of content. The objects in question may be quite disparate: neolithic textiles, mats, painted pottery from all over the world; or far-flung examples like Etruscan paintings, and Western Indian miniatures. Here images and associated descriptive facts are of secondary or little consequence; what is important is the configuration of visual elements, their inter-relationship, which gives what one may consider to be an organizing principle in the realm of sensations. Between themselves, however, such works differ greatly as to their visual *appearance*, that is, in the aspect to which they call attention.

On the other hand, art objects conceived differently and meant to function differently but produced in a particular culture at a given point of time often exhibit remarkable similarities in visual appearance. (Though I should add that when we speak of stylistic similarity in art it never connotes point to point identity, it only means a comparative similarity.) Within the ambit of twentieth century abstract art we have several examples to prove the point. Take Wassily Kandinsky, who says, 'I felt more and more clearly that it is not a question in art of the "formal" but of an inner wish (content) which imperatively determines the formal.'<sup>2</sup> And then he says, 'comes the wilful brush which first here, then there gradually conquers it with all energy peculiar to it.'<sup>f</sup> To view art as an expression of the 'inner wish' which the gesture of brush and sensation of colour lays bare on canvas; or to regard art as a direct communication, of the perceiver, of the original inner wish, without the mediation of intellect -- this is not new in European art. The impulse to match spiritual anguish with a corresponding articulation of pigment has been attributed, among many others, to artists so far apart as Grunewald and Van Gogh. And yet Kandinsky, who articulates this wish, has greater *apparent* affinity with such contemporaries as the painter-sculptor, Umberto Boccioni, or Robert Delaunay, with neither of whom he shares his *conception* about the function of art, than say Grunewald or Van Gogh.

What then is the conditioning factor in the matter of style? In an earlier paper<sup>3</sup> I had endeavoured to show that twentieth century abstract art, as much as it may be derived from the internal history of art, is essentially a product of bourgeois society at the stage of advanced industrialism. The alienation of the atomized individual from the human world of happenings and of relationships, compounding the inability of the individual to control the undesirable dynamics of the physical world, generates a distrust of phenomenal reality as such.

f) See illustration 2



This, it should be added, however, is the general, super-structural response to a deeper historical situation in which the twentieth century western artist has in fact discovered himself. That is to say, the anxieties, hopes and aspirations in each individual artist result in responses which have unique spiritual and formal qualities. Mondrian, with a bent of mind of Spinoza and Leibnitz, aspired to build through his art a parallel world of perfect equilibrium and quietitude; while a restless artist like Wassily Kandinsky expressed, as we have already said, anguish by conspicuously sensuous means, alternating this with the quintessential solace of childhood memory. Thus there are different responses in the very category of formal art: classicist abstraction<sup>g</sup> seeks to find analogous structures to certain contemplative conceptions (which may in some cases be indirectly connected to the perceived state of the phenomenal world, but are usually improvisations on borrowed concepts); the organic, romantic and expressive varieties of abstract art,<sup>h</sup> by referring to the emotional content of the creator's imagination, may give insight into the human meaning of the historically conditioned phenomenal world (although abstract expressionism often degenerates and becomes an improvisation on mere sensation).

It is not difficult to convince people that though art has undoubtedly some cognitive function, it is not of the kind that physics, metaphysics or logic fulfils. Art's function is to take cognizance of the human meaning of the phenomenal world. So the concept of progress, as cumulative development, is inoperative in art. It is, however, not so easy to convince artists that there are no irreducible immanent qualities in art. (We have already pointed out that had there been an immanent principle in art, any irreducible monad, at least all formalist art everywhere, beginning with the neolithic period, would have exhibited some basic similarity.) The morphology even of decorative objects gets conditioned on the one hand by the history of the given culture and on the other by the history of art up to that particular point of time.

That is to say, all worthwhile and considerable art has to have its genesis in a specific spatio-temporal situation. The difference is that in formal art the object created does not refer back to the germinal situation, but to an abstract conceptual understanding of the situation. In expressionist art (whether figurative or abstract) the object refers to the emotion generated by the situation. And in realist art (which is always

<sup>g</sup>) See illustrations 1 and 3

<sup>h</sup>) See illustrations 2 and 5.

figurative) the created object is the generalized essence of a specific situation.

Here a complementary fact should be stated forth with. Just as formal art is not independent of the cultural and psychological climate in which it is born, realistic art is not just a neutral reflection of reality, it is 'reality' in itself with formal values proper to its own function. Every art object, in other words, has a certain autonomy. The balance only tilts when this autonomy is made into a credo and art begins to be evaluated in terms of its internal logic only. It then appears as though development in art comes about merely through a contemplation of formal elements and their relationship. The problems this creates are as follows.

Very few artists can claim the status of being innovative, most artists improvise, some with much ingenuity. While the first category of artists suffer the pains to realize their visions, artists of the second category reach toward formal perfection by improvisation. Now the most daring of innovators in art has to fall back on art history for objectifying his conception; thus, in every innovation there is an element of improvisation. And thus, too, art styles, and art theories corresponding to them, enter into the orbit of every professional artist. Acting as ideology an art style may even condition an artist's cognitive faculty. It is precisely here that the danger lies; when art history (as a history of styles denoting different ways of manipulating the formal elements) becomes a deterministic force.

Secondly, if the spatio-temporal factor is eliminated from consideration and with it the original motivation, the point of genesis is lost, and the object of art, while it claims universality, becomes at the same time *opaque*. Formalists, whether artists or art historians, claiming a parallel (rather than referential) relationship to phenomenal reality, put such high stakes on autonomy that they are willing to concede to an irony: thus art that is autonomous and by that token universal also becomes, in terms of its meaning, impenetrable.

Since all theories of progress view development over a period of time, the formalists do very much admit the effect of time on the development and perfection for the formal language in art. But they never admit of spatial relativity of art styles. Gablik has even suggested that



observationally established spatial characteristics are actually temporal in character. Thus the image orientation of contemporary Indian art, according to her theory, is not due to it being Indian but due to its backwardness in the time scale. However, it is not only Einsteinian physics that asks us to take space and time as a continuum; any serious student of comparative history knows that besides chronological time, the spatial distance, or the difference of *place*, has the same significance as time distance in one homogeneous civilization.

About the relative influence of time and place on changing art styles we can be a little more specific. Pre-revolutionary Russia was basically a rural-agrarian country with rudimentary industrialization. After the revolution it gave rise to a highly conceptual and geometric art in the shape of Suprematism and Constructivism. Though unprecedented, this phenomenon points to the fact that art often functions as wish-fulfilment, as a compensatory reality. In poor and backward Russia a futuristic vision rode high on the revolutionary wave and it produced an art one might anticipate in an 'advanced' society. Conversely, in the United States there has been a wish to break the hold of a super advanced technology with an anarchic impulse<sup>1</sup> and go back to the freedom of nature. The allegory that we find in Jackson Pollock's and Robert Rauschenberg's paintings is probably of this inspiration.

It can be easily shown that all art which has its origin in great innovations, whether formal, or expressionist or realist has had a transcendental spirit. (In Hegelian terminology, a spirit of *aufhebung*.) This is the spirit that negates and rejects the available and the present as not sufficient and projects a vision of the beyond or the future. This is the critical spirit.

Following this line of thought, art has a vital social role to play. Its cognitive function does not so much lie in reflecting concepts as Gablik asserts, but in acting as an agent of cognition. Ironically, there are people other than artists, other than radical art historians, who recognize that art can and does play an important social role and that the social role of art flows precisely from its cognitive function which is also sometimes its ideological function. A great many of these people are cultural engineers acting for the established order and their very roles

i) See illustration 4.

j) See illustration 5.

prompt them to deny the cognitive and ideological function of art.

It can be said further that decorative and improvisatory art is more likely to be conformist, and preferred by cultural policy makers bent upon preserving an established order. Of course, bourgeois democratic society, and the capitalist order, works in a much subtler way than all other social systems. If by overplaying the formal aspects of art attention can be distracted from factors of its social genesis and the spirit of criticism therein, art can be more effectively emasculated and owned. Non-referential art, decorative to conceptual, – sometimes raised to the power of a metaphysics -- offers the easiest scope to carry out such designs.

We can now round up our discussion. First, irrespective of its main functions, all worthwhile art is created in response to problems and questions of human significance posed by the historical situation in which the artist finds himself. This holds true for even the most formalist, abstract-geometrical art. Secondly, even realistic art has to communicate formally, through using the expressive powers of the physical elements which go into making art objects; and by generalizing in terms of human feeling, emotions and thoughts a particular situation. Thus we must agree that formal elements have an intrinsic *quality potential* and the universality of art lies precisely in this potential. Thirdly, though the physical elements which go into the making of art in one medium are the same everywhere, at all times, their configurations and the extended morphologies of the objects in question differ in time and space. This is not only because certain configurations get associated with certain historical situations but because a specific art historical situation determines the form of present and future art in a significant manner. Fourthly, there is no universal law in art, not to speak of a developmental law.

It is, therefore, illogical to speak of an 'International Style' in art, -- the supposed fulfilment of an internal logic of art. Yet, since the opening decades of this century reverberating claims of an international art are constantly heard. Art practitioners, sometimes through a confused mode of thinking, may tend to take the affective and resultant universality of abstract art as causative universality. Cultural agents acting on behalf of a monopoly capitalist civilization have good reasons to encour-



age this confusion. This is precisely the reason why USICA patronizes a thesis on the Progress of Art.

1. Suzi Gablik, *Progress in Art*, Rizzoli, New York, 1977, 192 pages including illustrations
2. *Reminiscences* 1913.
3. Pranabranjan Ray, 'The Negation of Appearance in Modern Art', in *Proceedings of the Seminar on Indian Aesthetics and Art Activity*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla, 1966.

# Music and Modernism

Ashok D. Ranade

**T**HERE ARE some cultural terms which seem to possess an enduring prestige. More often than not such a prestige indicates the presence of qualities which have an inherent capacity to answer certain needs of the collective cultural mind. Such terms mirror the living, contemporary aspect of social life and, therefore, acquire a hold over thinkers as well as laymen. Modernism is one such term.

The etymology of the term modernism carries a useful hint of the basic cause of its perennial attraction. Modernism or modernity lead us back to 'modernus', meaning 'just now'. In contemporary usage too, the terms signify a desire 'to be with the present'. The desire to keep pace with the times is not a new phenomenon. All evidence suggests that modernity and its characteristics have a tendency to recur. Every student of cultural history comes to note that cultural modernity *had been here before*. The wider the spectrum before us, the stronger the feeling that creative minds had been 'modern' before our times.

However, the distinction between modernism and modernity cannot be overlooked. Firstly because they are overlapping concepts and secondly because very often they are confused with each other. Modernity is a broad term encompassing within it the areas of science, religion and art. Modernism is a narrower manifestation which moves to establish a clearer, coherent and almost philosophic relationship with a particular, well-defined life-area. Of necessity, an 'ism' tries to construe



happenings in a particular walk of life at a particular period. It can be safely maintained that when a number of minds feel a property or a group of properties to have achieved the status of a *zeitgeist*, an ism is born. Focussing our concern on arts, we can state that when a group of qualities is discernible in creation, reception and appraisal of an art-activity, the event exemplifies the advent of an ism. It is in this context that the relationship of modernism and music is sought to be examined here.

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A patent question raised in relation to modernism in the arts is whether the concerned art is keeping pace with the general life-style in a given period or not. It should, therefore, lead one to conclude that the concept has two aspects: the temporal and the content-oriented. Terms like contemporary, period-piece, futuristic, etc., reflect the temporal aspect. On the other hand, use of terms like new, neo-traditional, revolutionary, etc., refer to the content aspect. When modernism is averred of music, both these aspects are expected to be duly reflected in it. In other words, when a piece of music is accepted as 'modern' it means that it is accepted as 'belonging to the present' and also as displaying a capacity to cater to certain musical needs which would not otherwise be satisfied by the existing music.

This general position cannot, however, be easily assumed because of a complicating factor. It must be remembered that music can hardly be confined to art-music alone. In all sophisticated societies four musical streams flow side by side to complete the soundscape. No instance of modernism can hold good in equal measure in the case of these varieties. For example, primitive music can be taken as a test-case. The very reason for its existence is its inseparableness from the totality of life. Primitive music is so intertwined with the life-style in question that it can hardly be dissociated from the latter in respect of its promptings, reception, expression, etc. As a result 'modernism' and primitive music can hardly be brought together in an affirmative relationship. Modernism can be predicated in the case of only those phenomena which allow non-coincidence of life-style and music-style. In other words, the presence or occurrence of modernism needs an inherent cultural possibility of dissociation of sensibilities on the temporal axis. Primitive culture is too homogeneous to allow this and hence there cannot be a modern primitive music. Thus understood, modernism becomes a relative con-

cept. Nothing can be modern by itself. To be modern is to repattern the temporal relationship of cultural manifestations of a social group. It is evident that primitive life excludes such a possibility.

Folk-music is in a slightly different position. A considerable portion of folk-music is secular. As a result it does not totally eliminate the possibility of a partial change. However, the changes can only be partial because the characteristic of functionality has its own constraints on folk-music. In this manner, though modernism is possible in the case of folk-music, yet, the proportion of the potential or possible change is too inadequate to merit a discussion while considering the problem of musical modernism.

There remain, therefore, the three major categories of music : urban, popular and art. Of the three, the urban variety is entirely shaped by the needs of urban societies. Political songs, *mela* songs, *bhajans* recited in crowded metropolitan trains, band-music of marriage bands, etc., are instances of musical structures that possess in-built mechanisms responsive to the needs of the time. And as far as popular music is concerned the category chiefly consists of music which is propagated and often manufactured by the mass-media including broadcasting, television, films, recorded music and the like. Popular music, as a musical category, is a product of the total social, economic and cultural processes initiated and carried by mass-media. It can, therefore, be expected to be modernist on account of intrinsic compulsions.

The third major category -- that of art music -- needs a separate discussion. Art music suffers the least from the direct pressures of day-to-day life. Its basic motivation too exhibits the touch of materialism to the minimum. In short, the modernism it can boast of, is bound to be a direct result of aesthetic compulsions. In order to get an idea of musical modernism, if we decide to apply the convenient yardstick of examining the nature and proportion of changes that take place we note that art music exemplifies two types of changes : some introduced during a performance and some others that occur in the tradition taken as a whole. During actual performances the logic of the internal and intended organization of the musical components undergoes continuous changes. Quite often, the approach that leads to such changes is in reality, due to atavistic tendencies. Thus, a reappearance of tendencies apparently belonging to the past makes its impact felt as an instance of



modernism. On the other hand, on occasions, the changes are prognostic in character. (Though they are realized to be so only later!) In sum, modernism in art music is a complicated affair. The complications are multiplied further when various forms of music are brought into the picture. The forms differ in the extent of modernism they display. It is next to impossible to bring in graphic exactitude to describe modernism vis-a-vis various forms of music. As art music is not our central inquiry, it is not even necessary to do so. Therefore, based on the foregoing remarks, it is now proposed to discuss the characteristics of modernism likely to hold true in respect of musical activity considered as a whole.

The very first characteristic of musical modernism is its urban base (and not merely an urban foundation). It is, of course, true that the three musical categories of urban, popular and art music can reach human groups living in non-urban areas but they cannot have their origins in non-urban centres. It is not necessary at this point for us to define what is 'urban'. The collection and collation of data on population, available communications, location of administrative centres, distribution of educational institutions, has answered the above question. Without having technical knowledge of any kind even a layman is able to distinguish among seats of human culture such as, for example, inhabitation, hamlet, village, township, city, metropolitan city, etc. The point is that from among these modernism depends on the urban locations for its gestation, flowering and value. Modernism is an urban manifestation.

Secondly, musical modernism invariably expresses itself as a deviation from the established tradition or occasionally even as a break with it. Sometimes it is also possible that the deviation is initiated into action by extra-musical events or ideas. However, in the final analysis the deviation has to meet definite musical needs in order to justify its continued consideration as a characteristic of musical modernism.

Nevertheless, the deviation that marks the onset of modernism proves to be the continuation of a larger tradition – a fact realized when the situation is appraised in its totality. In other words, events or ideas that appear revolutionary during a particular period or at a particular point of time, later impress us merely as consolidations or continuations of larger continuities which are perceived when a perspective (covering a larger period) is obtained. Retrospections are virtual denials of revolu-

tions, though the initial impact of modernism is often felt as the presence of radical deviations or revolutions. The phenomenon is detected with such regularity that it compels inclusion as an inherent facet of musical modernism.

However, why does this happen? The reason is that a closer and more detailed examination of a longer period reveals a pattern : it then becomes noticeable that events and ideas sporting revolutionary labels are found to have 'similar' precedents. What appears to be new, radical, deviationist, revolutionary, etc., turns out to be a convincing example of recurrence. Once having lost their revolutionary character, the only alternatives that remain open in respect of such events are either to interpret them as evolutionary or to classify them as changes with open possibilities. Per se this is not displeasing -- however, it means that the concept of revolution suffers an attenuation of ideological splendour! Ultimately, however, there seems to be no escape from the fact that continuity is the essence of cultural movement.

It could be easily maintained that the easiest and perhaps commonest way in which modernism takes its first effective step is by resorting to grammatical deviation. In fact, even if the basic motivation is aesthetic the initial impact of modernist music is a deviation registered in respect of the established musicological rules. For example, very frequently it is found that a musically modernist situation is created because the established norms about acceptable sounds, their sequence, accompanying rhythms, etc., are set aside.

Reference to grammar brings in its wake a reference to the criterion of correctness or purity. Usually the first and the strongest exception taken to modernism is on the ground that it fosters incorrect and impure music. The precise nature of this criticism should be properly understood because it has a very wide circulation.

Grammar means an automatic invoking of the sanction of the scholastic tradition in art. Art activity always presents two streams or traditions : the performing tradition and the scholastic tradition. It is the second which is strongly represented by the written grammatical code. It is commonly perceived that the scholastic tradition diverges from and lags behind the performing tradition. Just as literary expression and tradition remains ahead of the grammatical tradition in language.

Karavats 12.11.52



age, similarly, modern music is always found to register a deviation from the written, grammatical tradition. As only the codified portion of art activity is reduced to writing, deviation from the written is inevitable. The fact that art practices and their codifications are not co-orbital is absolutely unregrettable because it goes to prove that performers in general are less weighed down by grammatical constraints. At the same time, it also signifies avoiding a hasty codification of new, untested art practices. It is against this background that every generation needs its own *Manu* for music, as also its own deviators.

The point is that both grammarians and performers can stake their claim to musical modernism through deviation, though with a difference. The difference is that in order to judge a grammarian's deviation one has to refer to the scholastic tradition, while to do so in the case of a performer one goes back to both the traditions. Under the circumstances, it appears that a performer has more opportunities to be a modernist because he enjoys the option of deviating from two continuities unlike the grammarian whose choice is restricted to only one tradition.

Features of modernism discussed so far have been of a general nature in the sense that they possess validity vis-a-vis other arts too. But of immediate interest are those characteristics which have a direct bearing on the performance of music.

*New relationships in internal organisation.* It is to be admitted that no music can be composed out of silences alone. Sound as a physical phenomenon remains the basic raw-material of music. Further, as a physical manifestation music will always be subject to the acoustic laws that govern the behaviour of sound as such. In sum, music has to live with sound, though changes can be introduced in the internal organization of the acoustic and musical components. For instance, the mutual relations of notes, rhythms and tempi can be changed. Selecting the fundamental strategy of tonal organization opens up immense possibilities for melodic and/or harmonic 'thinking' in music. In addition, words too establish varying relationships with all the other fundamental elements of music. In these ways new intra-structural musical relationships can come into being. The contextual changes thus effected have a direct bearing on the aesthetic significance of the musical pieces.

*New musical instruments.* Musicians in quest of new timbres are

naturally interested in inducting new musical instruments. However, extra-musical considerations also provide impetus in this search. Deliberate manufacture and use of new musical instruments has often sounded a note of musical modernism. Attempts at using the same instruments in a different manner or with changed playing techniques are also responsible in bring about changes in the existing soundscape. Sometimes all other factors are kept constant while the context of employing the instruments is turned into a variable. Females taking to instruments conventionally restricted to male players is also a modernist 'gimmick', which may or may not affect the performance in substance.

*Changing cartography of musical forms.* A very important indication of musical modernism is the shifting of boundaries that divide the existing musical forms. More often than not, a strong battle-cry is raised in defence of maintaining the 'purity' of forms whenever their contours are sought to be altered.

Whenever the limits that demarcate the subdivisions of the total musical territory are blurred or shifted, an interesting consequence is noticed : new 'mixed' art forms come into vogue. Two or more existing art forms are combined and new genres come into being, in the process throwing fresh challenges to creative, receptive as well as critical sensibilities. The artistic excellence of such forms cannot, of course, be guaranteed. However they are at least expected to be 'different'. Novelty, and not originality, may happen to be their main characteristic. Nevertheless, it allows them to lay claim to modernism.

*Composite art forms.* Composite art forms tell a different story from the one traced by the mixed art forms. In their case two or more arts (and not art forms) interact to create the composite art forms. Thus, drama and music come together to give us opera, music-drama, musicals, etc.; dance and music combine to yield ballet; photography and literature join to create films. The point to be remembered in this context is that each of the combining arts is a full-fledged, independent and adequate aesthetic expression and hence the generation of composite art forms which they lead to proves to be an exciting event. The three main combining categories of art relevant in the context are the fine arts, performing arts and the literary arts. The aesthetic outcome depends on the nature of and varying ascendancies enjoyed by the arts which combine and participate in the creative adventure. It can be broadly stated that



the developmental phases in which different arts are inclined to come together seem to alternate with periods in which arts tend to move away from each other. Tracing such movements back to known antiquity, it is revealed that in those times two or more arts were generally found in a common or a combined expression. Individual arts began charting their separate courses in later ages and succeeded, after a time, in creating their own smaller autonomies. Once again, after a lapse of time they started coming together severally to create composite art forms and this third phase has universally been acclaimed as a symptom of modernism.

Composite art forms too cannot claim aesthetic excellence just by virtue of their having combined. But it must be admitted that there are greater possibilities of their being so because the combining items themselves are proven depositories of aesthetic values.

*Closer literary orientation.* Examination of the performance-related characteristics of musical modernism also reveals that modernist music exhibits a closer alignment with literature. (In this context literature excludes oral literature. The reason is that due to various aesthetic and non-aesthetic reasons modernism accentuates the function of the written and writing in general. This is not to suggest that all musical forms come under the influence of literature in an equal measure. But generally speaking, greater awareness of literary meaning, increased solicitude about pronunciation, greater variety in the poetic forms included in the overall musical repertoire and other such features become noticeable in musical activity considered as a whole. It can, in fact, be safely argued that a high regard for language as such (and not only the literature part of it) is associated with musical modernism. The newly felt respect for the language-literature pair does not remain confined to performance. It makes itself felt in the conception, preservation and criticism of music. The way criticism is affected by it is briefly described at a later point.

*The Janus-faced artist.* Protagonists of musical modernism are found to possess two musical faces! At least from one end this intriguing phenomenon is related to performance. The artist-protagonists in question are Janus-faced in the sense that they are bred thoroughly in the authentic older tradition and yet manage to grow out of it. For example, in India they are exemplified by musicians whose musical pedigree is traced through the time-honoured *guru-shishya* schooling in

learning, teaching and performing practices. However, they take value loaded decisions which ultimately lead to deviations so vital as to bring them and their music in the modern stream. Their's is a case of a desired musical apostacy which results in cultural enrichment. These Janus-faced musicians are able to intuit the nature of the necessary deviations and follow up the intuitions with actual practice coupled with an evangelic fervour. Apart from the artistic courage and the aesthetic convictions they possess, such artists also seem to be endowed with qualities of charismatic leadership. To that extent they hardly conform to the image of artists as ivory-tower personalities. It is significant to note that such artists, though often born in villages or backward areas, soon move out to settle in urban areas. In view of the urban basis of musical modernism, this can hardly be described as an unimportant coincidence.

*Changes in critical stance.* The pervasive influence of musical modernism does not fail to affect exercises of the critical faculty. In the first instance, as the cartography of musical forms has already undergone changes the critical criteria or the canons of evaluation are also compelled to register a parallel change. Ideally speaking, critics are expected to keep criticism coextensive with the efforts of creative artists and hence a change in the existing corpus of the criteria is inevitable.

It is noticed that such a change results in the adoption of the multiple criteria method. Modernist criticism tends to regard each work of art as a multi-faced, complex phenomenon, and as such reveals the need for the application of the multi-criteria method. A closer examination further shows that the criteria are drawn from diverse disciplines like linguistics, anthropology, psychology -- thus bringing into the field of operation sets of interdisciplinary criteria that open up a number of new approaches. Under the circumstances, even the 'older' criteria acquire new contexts. To that extent modern criticism can become subtler.

Secondly, the entire critical usage displays a new flexibility and there is a symptomatic abundance of new critical isms. The monolithic evaluative theoretical structures based on *rasa*, *dhwani*, imitation doctrines, etc., no longer enjoy undisputed predominance. Instead, the critical scene is now peopled by a plethora of visions or insights vying with each other for a comprehensive validity. Of course it is a foregone conclusion that some of the new isms themselves might develop into



Another modernist feature of the socio-economic category is the musician's growing internationalism. The modernist artist moves out far and wide in search of new patronage. Of course it is true that even the earlier musicians used to travel widely and visit places beyond national borders to seek new and more munificent patronage. But there is a qualitative distinction between the two quests. The modern artist moves out to a patronage that is essentially provided by a culturally alien group. He is, therefore, required to operate in a radically changed situation. It must be admitted that in a very large measure the non-Indian patronage of music belonging to various nations (Indians, for example) is a patronage offered to music dubbed as 'ethnic' -- a term suggestive of unhappy concepts of cultural hierarchies and unable to do justice to highly sophisticated music systems. The point is that the contemporary modernist has to improvise, adapt, modify or even dilute the musical content in response to the new 'foreign' patronage. Even the mode of presentation does not remain unaffected. Further, once an artist turns into an internationalist in this manner, his presentations before home audiences too undergo gradual but sure transformation.

It is not easy to judge the desirability or otherwise of being an internationalist artist in the sense discussed above. Many value judgments become necessary when facing the unique problems raised by situations involving cross-cultural communication. The mature approach needed to meet the challenge is obviously rare to come by.

Musical modernism is also found to register a rise in the social prestige of musicians in general. This is so chiefly because musicians are no longer treated as mere skilled entertainers or craftsmen. They are accorded the status of an important cultural component. Modernism favours an educational philosophy which regards music as a discipline on par with others generally included in the category of humanities. It is also seen that a modernist musician might come from a family or caste not conventionally given to the pursuit of the arts in general and music in particular. This latter feature is further evidence of the rise in prestige mentioned earlier.

On account of the enhancement of his social status a modern musician tends to adopt changed techniques of creating and maintaining his own social image. Self-advertisement and propaganda, interviews, news-conferences, delegations, committees and other such paraphernalia

rigid conceptual frameworks after some time and thus lose in the name of action. But the very fact that there *can* be a new flowering of isms is itself an indication of a more liberal critical climate and the subsequent flexibility of thought-structures.

Thirdly, modern musical criticism shows a better consciousness of the other arts as arts. This can be interpreted as a significant benefit accruing from its overall accommodativeness.

So far, we have been dealing with features of modernism which were patently performance-related. However, there are others which may not display such a direct connection. These may be categorized as socio-economic.

The very first feature among such characteristics is the change that takes place in the patronage given to music. Modernism can be easily equated with a discernible heterogeneity of audience. Demands made on the artists by a heterogeneous audience are bound to be more general, varied as well as numerous. As an antidote to the adverse effects spilling over from this generality of the audience, many devices are employed to organize the audience. For example, with the onset of musical modernism, music clubs or music circles are formed, public concerts are organized by sale of tickets and felicitation programmes and other such music situations come into vogue. All such attempts are indications of the desire to reorganize the heterogeneous audience and to ensure a homogeneous audience (with its musical expectations enjoying a neater focus).

Examined from this point of view the modernist patronage could be described as the result of a simultaneously carried out bi-directional movement. On the one hand, patronage of a single individual (like that of a king, feudal lord, etc.) becomes less prevalent and instead social patronage takes its place. At the same time, the social patronage is accepted only after a group is subjected to a reorganization designed to ensure that the artist and the audience are tuned to each other. Music is a performing art and as such is shaped by audience participation to a great extent. Hence the change in patronage assumes significance. A modernist audience means patronage which has undergone changes due to factors like urbanization, mass-media-culture, etc.



of modern social communication are now regularly exploited by the musician. To that extent, he has been forced to curb his individuality and conform to an image which is acceptable to modern society as a whole. He now organizes himself in a way that is conducive to *project* an acceptable image.

Perhaps the least recognized characteristic of musical modernism is the introduction of a new ritualism. Musical modernism is generally associated with better academic education of the artist and hence it is probably true to say that the ritualism manifest in initiation-acts, *guru* - worship, first performance ceremonies, etc., is regarded as dispensable. But it is not correct to say that ritualism is completely eliminated. The fact is that the earlier rites are replaced by new secular or a-religious or semi-religious rituals. (A proof of this observation will be found in the study and practice methods, preservation techniques as well as reception of music by listeners.) In this context a ritual is to be understood as any purposeful act or activity regularly enacted or carried out by an individual to attain a psycho-physical state of equilibrium in order to ensure or enhance the effectiveness of study, practice, performance or reception of music. The stresses and strains of modern life call for a quicker and closer coordination of the faculties involved in an act of performance and hence the rise of a new ritualism is inevitably witnessed. It is not rare to find a similarity or connection between a modern ritual and the religious practices of a bygone era. In fact, such a phenomenon can often be interpreted as a reappearance. It only proves that by definition ritualism need not be equated with superstition.

It is obvious that while one is considering the characteristics of musical modernism in a wider perspective, two more problems cannot fail to disturb us. Firstly, can every act of change claim to be modern? And secondly, is the concept of modernism related to that of progress?

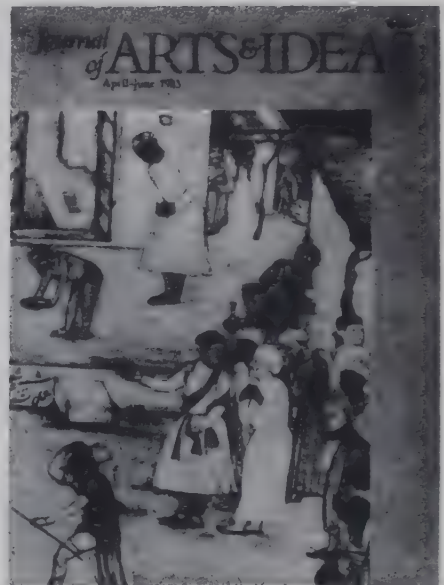
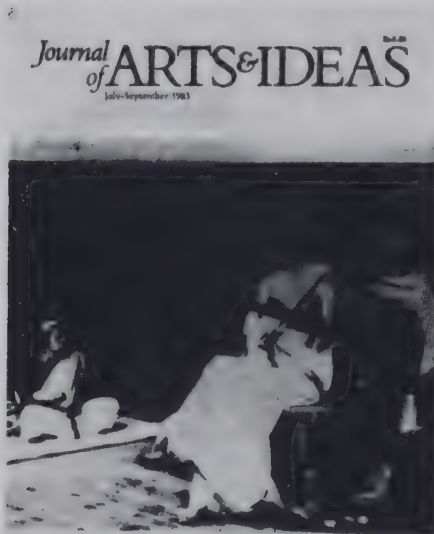
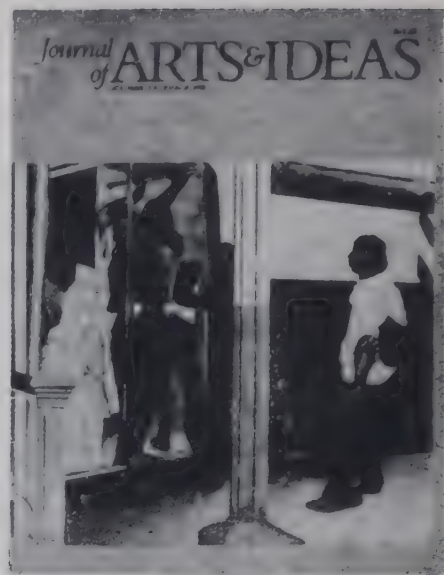
It is, of course, preposterous to say that every act of change is to be classified as a manifestation of the modernist temper. But it has also to be admitted that every act of change can lay claim to modernity. This is so because every change by itself satisfies one pre-condition of modernism, that of keeping pace with the times. The temporal aspect of modernism is thus taken care of. However, the content aspect remains. Those events or changes which fail to pass the test set up by the second pre-condition (i.e., the content aspect) are only accepted as

fashions or popular modes. In this manner every change can validly stake a claim to modernity on account of having exhibited a temporal consonance but it has to bide time in order to gain full recognition. The full status of being modern can be accorded to it only after the content aspect too displays a similar consonance. It is obvious that the temporal consonance is easier to realize and is usually detected early. The existence or absence of the content consonance is confirmed or can be confirmed only after a time-lag. Admitting a slightly paradoxical situation it can be stated that a full modernist status can be judged to be so only in retrospect!

Turning to the second question, that is, of the relation between the concepts of progress and modernism, it must be understood that the former concept does not belong to the field of art and aesthetics. Its proper field is to be found in politico-economical thinking. In its ultimate and abstracted state the concept of progress is related to the concept of the Good. In asking a question like 'Is work progressive?' we are going beyond aesthetics. It is not that the question is invalid, but it should be raised in disciplines other than the arts and in a different manner. A progressive work of art might thus be an inferior work of art. On the other hand, a work that passes the tests set up by both the aspects of modernism will turn out to be a great work of art.

Musical modernism has, to sum up, a function to perform. It provides an ideal and an effective answer to stagnation in musical activity considered as a whole. Whatever might be the principles on which cultural development operates, modernism must have a place in it. In total disregard of our likes and dislikes, all changes are entitled to parade as both modern and artistic at least in the initial stages, and they will be inclined to do so. Resorting once again to a paradox, it could be said that the timelessness of a work of art is only proved by the test of time! It is only the deeper intuitions of artists and critics that possess the power to proclaim the timelessness of art without relying on the test of time.





**Editor:** G.P. Deshpande

*Some of the articles appearing in the Oct.-Dec. 1983 issue of the Journal:*

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| Ashish Rajadhyaksha   | : | More than a Certain Tendency in the Indian Cinema                 |
| Arun Khopkar          | : | The Linear and the Displaced : Towards a Cinematic Self-Identity. |
| J.P.S. Uberoi         | : | An Other Science of Colour  |
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# The *Khayal* : What It Is and What It Is Not

Neela Khopkar

**T**HE RAAG is often considered to be the main characteristic of Indian classical music. But this is true only of the *dhrupad style*, a style that must be recognized in the stages of development of classical music as earlier to the *khayal*. As we take note of these stages, and certain shifts in emphasis that have taken place in the growth of the form, we would have to recognize that the fundamental characteristic of the *khayal* is not the *raag* but the *bandish*: the composed form of the song.

The *bandish* of the *khayal* is composed of three elements – the *raag*, *theka* and *poetry*. The *dhrupad* also has three elements in it: *raag*, *taal* and *poetry*, but the interaction between the three is of a different kind. The *dhrupad* divides the words of the poem further into syllables, and the notes of the *raag*, the beats of the *taal* and the syllables of the word are sung in unison. A triad is created, of the note, the beat and the syllable, which has lines that are equidistant and symmetric. These lines divide the *taal* twice, thrice, four or eight times as fast, but always maintaining the mathematical graph.

A *dhrupad* makes extensive use of slides – curves in the line known as *meend* and *ghasit*, and *gamakas* or wavy patterns caused by variations in the volume of the voice. These patterns are however explored independently; the singer in the earlier part of his recital – called the *nom-tom* – explores, and as it were explains, the *raag* and this part is rendered without percussion. Once the percussion is introduced, the graph of



equidistant lines described above is created and seldom deviated from.

The *khayal* integrates what the *dhrupad* gives in disintegrated form. It does this through dynamic interaction between its three components of *raag*, *theka* and poetry. To comprehend the nature of this interaction we must understand the nature of each of the elements independently.

The waves of a *raag* flow around the word.

The word is musically realized in both its phonetic and semantic values. It is treated in unbroken, complete form.

The *taal* attunes itself to the ongoing waves of the *raag* and the word; it does not remain *taal*, it becomes *theka*.

The voice of the singer has to balance the waves of the *bandish*. The voice must be broad and deep, and pointed and sharp as well. Sometimes the singer exerts pressure on a particular note, elaborating it into a wave that becomes gradually lighter and thinner. At other times the singer applies equal pressure everywhere, to carve out a zig-zag wave. At all times the voice interacts with the waves – the asymmetrical waves – of the *bandish*, and modulates itself accordingly. It takes pauses and gives rise to patterns that enhance the sensuous and emotive waves of the *bandish*.

The *khayal* presupposes an interaction between the singer and the *bandish*. It leads, in fact, to a significant interpretation of the *bandish* which in turn depends upon the mood of the singer and of the connoisseur with whom the singer attempts a dialogue. It is the response of the audience that adds colour to the singing.

\* \* \* \*

The entire structure implies a dialectical interaction between what we may now term as form, content and technique. The presentation of a *bandish* implies the unfolding of a process – of improvisation of the song form, of creation and recreation of the composed form. The *bandish* then acquires an individuality, an identity through the interpretation of the singer depending upon the 'here' and 'now' of the presentation. The same *bandish* thus undergoes changes with different audiences and different moods of the singer.

A few instructions the old masters used to give are worth mentioning. They used to say: 'Sing according to the face of the *bandish* (its twists and turns).' Another famous instruction was: 'Think of the *nayika* that is depicted in the *bandish* and elaborate on that.'

These statements imply a theme for improvisation. The lines of poetry in the *bandish* give one combination. The singer has to read between the words and arrive at newer combinations, both semantically and musically. Each new combination adds to the elaboration and creates a musical expanse. It communicates both what is given in the *bandish* as well as the interpretation of the singer.

An extended musical illustration should explain the point. '*Peer na jaani re balma, niki tihari anokhi preet*' is a *khayal* in Malkauns in *taal* Tilwada. What does it convey? The lover does not understand the pangs of love -- He does love me, no doubt, but, what a strange way of loving! There is no frustration, but a sorrowful anguish. The desire to be in togetherness with the lover.

How does it go musically? \* '*Peer na*'. There comes a pause -- a pause preceding the *sama* (i.e., emotional high point); *ma s s<sup>\*\*</sup>ga, ma dha - dhaivat (dha)* is just touched and left.

The *sama* comes on *jaa in jaani* -- a *kharka* with the *dha dha ma ma-madhyam (ma)* is pressurized and a slide goes downward up to *shadja (saa)*. Again, *shadja (saa)* is touched and left. A pause -- tension -- *ga s ma, ma s dha s s; aandolan* on *dhaivat (dha)* as tension grows; again a pause *ma dha ma dha ma dha ni saa nee nee s*. The complexity begins. The pattern ends just before the first beat of the *khaali*, i.e., *taa*. The word *jaani* is complete by now.

*Re* comes on *taa*, a softer *bol* in the *theka*; it is a slide from *nishad (nee)* to *shadja (saa)*. It provides a brief resting point. Now it addresses the *balma* in a low and soft voice. *Ga ga saa saa s s dha s nee dha s s*.

Does it talk to him, or to her own self? -- yes, probably. That is *niki tihari*, *nee saa nee saa, nee saa nee saa ga ga saa saa s dha s nee dha s s*. *Anokhi preet* shows the disturbance again. The voice rises to the *madhyam (ma)* and ends on *gandhar*. *Pree* in *preet* comes with a slide



from *madhyam* (*ma*) to *shadjā* (*saa*); *ta* goes in lower octave – dha s nee s dha s.

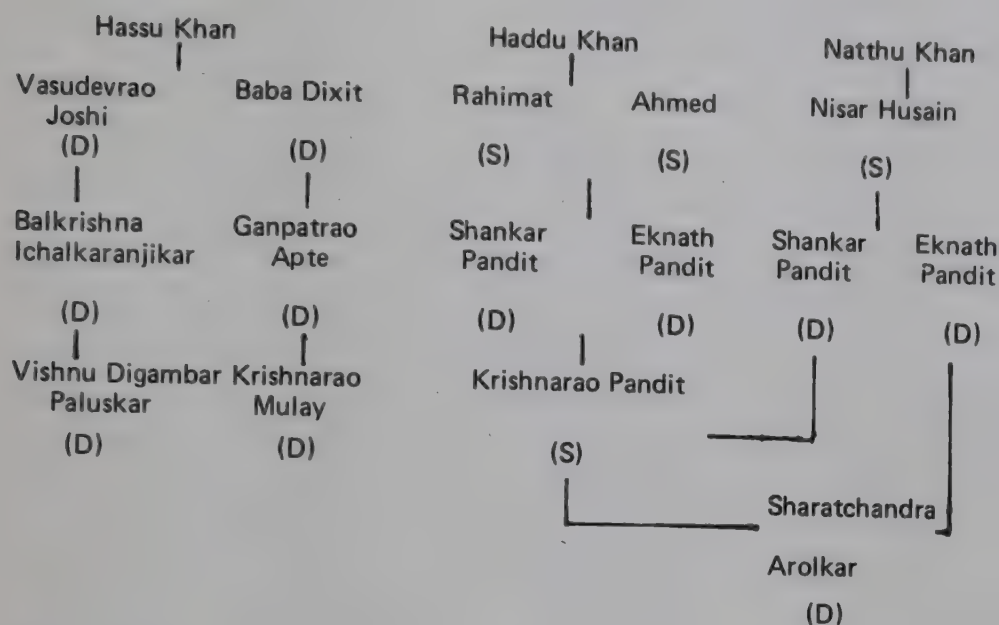
The rhythmic cycle of Tilwada is over, and she is back in her mood to say *peer na jaani re balma*. The main theme comes back. This gives a basis for further elaboration; a seed to be nurtured progressively. Now it is up to the singer to create and recreate a musical expanse of tensions and releases and to interpret the *bandish*. The individual thus interacts in a creative manner with tradition.

Exploring the form-content relationship in *khayal* thus, it dawns upon the mind that the form is by no means as abstract as it has been made out to be in all these years. The importance of the word, its emotive and phonetic potential was never known to us so clearly. Why was one not exposed to this form of *khayal*? Why is one socialized into the classical tradition of music only within the compartments of the *gharanas*? A brief history of the growth of the form, from its origins in the court of Mohammed Shah Rangila in the middle of the 18th century (around 1749), would possibly bring these questions into sharper focus.

The *khayal* such as we have seen above was conceived by two *been* players in Mohammed Shah Rangila's court, Sadarang and Adarang. An interesting anecdote has it that there once took place a conflict between the *dhrupad* singers and the *been* players in the court, giving an impetus to the *been* players to seek a new form of singing that would move away from the rigid, mathematical structure of the *dhrupad*. Some kind of an interaction between all the prevalent musical forms seems to have given rise to the *khayal*: it had the directness of expression, and modulations of voice as suited to content, from the folk song, the sensuousness and emotiveness of the *ghazal* and *thumri*, the intricate *taan*-patterns of sufi qawali, the *bol-taans* of the *dhrupad*, the curves of the *nom-tom* and the resonant sound-waves of the *been*. All these blended into a fresh identity in the *khayal*.

One of the descendants of Sadarang Adarang, Natthan Peerbaksh, settled in Gwalior. He popularized the form and handed it down to many disciples. His grandsons, Haddu Khan, Hassu Khan and Natthu Khan became well-known exponents. Many singers of the day were fascinated by their singing and wanted to become their disciples. But choosy and brahminical as they were, they taught very few.

The following chart will indicate the lineage of this tradition.



(S) -- Son

(D) -- Disciple

The original *khayal gharana*, which seems to have presented a model of *khayal* singing, came to be known as the Gwalior *gharana* chiefly to distinguish itself from a number of other *gharanas* that later came up, notably the Jaipur, Agra, Kirana and Patiala. While the history of each is not directly relevant to this paper, and perhaps requires a separate study, the forms of *khayal* presented by each is certainly relevant.

Most of the later *gharanas* were established by *dhrupad* singers who, feeling threatened by the new form, began composing their own *khayals*. Their *khayal*, however, never transcended the linear, equidistant mathematical lines of the *dhrupad* - a tendency noticed particularly in Jaipur and Agra *gharanas*. Other *gharanas*, while undoubtedly popular, do not present this clarity in their form. The issue, according to me, in determining this clarity is to determine how close the singing comes to the original *khayal* form of interaction between *raag*, *theka* and poetry.



To my mind the original *khayal* form is the most evolved. It has the potential to absorb a new word, connoting a new idea, thus to communicate the cultural ethos of any period in history, to transcend the boundaries and limitations of the period in which it was born. It demonstrates the potential for being treated on a par with forms like drama, the novel or cinema.

We return to the same problems. Why is it that we have not been *socialized* into the form of *khayal* that we have just seen? *Khayal* music is taught by a guru to his disciples. This forms a structure of relationships which is very close to that of the patriarchal joint family. The norms governing the relationships are similar to the ones observed in the authoritarian structure of the joint family. The guru becomes the authoritarian father. He takes care of the disciple by imparting to him the knowledge that has formed the source of his survival. These norms are, therefore, born out of a confusion of attitudes towards (a) knowledge and (b) source of survival. The highest goal for a guru to achieve is an earnest desire to see himself surpassed by his disciple (*shishyat ichchet paraajayam*). But if the disciple really does this, it is likely to affect the guru's very conditions for survival. This creates something of a love-hate relationship which, instead of helping the development of the disciple and thereby the tradition, becomes a barrier very difficult to remove. Often disciples seem to deviate from the norms of behaviour in order to assert their individuality. And it would seem to be a pattern that only sons-cum-disciples are the ones allowed to flourish, since it is they who add to the property of the primary group, i.e., social unit of the family.

The relationship is then also governed by traditional social norms born out of loyalties to caste, community, religion and so on. Thus, in a situation as insecure as this, the *khayal gharana*, which has always operated as a power group vis-a-vis other *gharanas*, lays down norms and conventions – usually tacit and unstated – that prejudice the minds of in-group members. They can hardly become objective about their *gharanas*, their gurus, or their music.

Around the turn of the 20th century certain developments took place. Some attempts towards an objective study of *khayal* music were started by Vishnu Digambar Paluskar by opening schools of music, and by V.N. Bhatkhande by collecting *bandishes* from singers of various

*gharanas* which he recorded in notation form. Bhatkhande also made an attempt to give a theoretical structure to classical music, which was later made the standard in the various music schools. A number of music conferences began to be held, promoting musicians and popularizing classical music. Thus, music and musicians acquired a status in the eyes of the urban middle-class.

With this the problem of survival was gradually solved, but that of objective analysis remained unsolved. The only teaching method in the *gharana* structure was an imitation of the guru. The music schools, using chiefly Bhatkhande's theoretical structures, produced not singers but listeners -- not Tansens but Kansens, as V.D. Paluskar said. In other words, the schools of music worked to popularize classical music. And the responsibility of producing singers remained that of the *gharanas*.

By this time, consequently, the *gharanas* were able to establish themselves comfortably. Most had their own following, which grew as students taught in music schools, came to the *gharanas* for 'advanced' education and in turn permitted the *gharanas* to flourish. Since each *gharana* was accepted only for its special appeal to its listeners, the sole criterion remained that of popularity, leaving little room for objective analysis. The growth of the *gharanas* led to an increasingly rigid guru-shishya relationship, restraining growth and further development. (It may be mentioned here that one can notice a trend of eclecticism among the present singers, who may seek more than one guru to escape this rigidity. Their achievements are worth debating, but perhaps in a separate analysis.)

The only *gharana* that preserved the authentic form of *khayal* was Gwalior (a chart of which is given earlier). Due to the brahminical attitude towards knowledge and the imparting of it, very few could carry the tradition on further.

The various barriers posed to its growth notwithstanding, the *khayal* has a potential to flow with changing times. But this will not happen unless we experiment with the idea of interaction between *raag*, *theka* and poetry -- poetry expressing new cultural ethos. In short, the interweaving of the basic elements in the *khayal* have to be placed in the present socio-cultural context. It will be only then that we can relate to the traditional roots and still deviate from them. That will be the conti-



uation of the tradition in the real sense of the term. The concept of continuity of sound in *khayal* takes a pause for granted; in fact, it is only through punctuation that thought is communicated in any language, and so in *khayal* singing. Similarly, the continuation of tradition is possible only if we can deviate from the traditional ethos, in composing, singing as well as teaching music.

Therefore, the relationships that govern our present processes of teaching also have to undergo change. The patriarchal joint family structure has to give way to a new form of socialization based on equality in relationships and objectivity in the pursuit of knowledge. Only then can we have a teacher who would be happy to see the student's progress and will be ready to learn from his student, and treat the process of imparting knowledge as team work, in an extended family-situation.

One can draw a great deal from the *khayal* tradition and can get insights regarding the use of sound in film and theatre, to merely take one example.

It is only by relating to the tradition as an outsider that one can be creative as an insider. I have tried to throw a few ideas about the relationship between an outsider and an insider in the *khayal* tradition. Let us take this as the basic situation and view and review the problems in music hereafter.

Many of the ideas expressed in the first section are those of my guru Pandit Sharatchandra Arolkar.

\*The musical *swaras* are as follows: *shadja* (sa), *rishabha* (re), *gandhar* (ga), *madhyam* (ma), *pancham* (pa), *dhaivat* (dha), *nishad* (ni).

\*\*The notation 's' is called *avagruha*. It means that the last note with which the previous word ends is prolonged for one *matra* (beat of the tabla).

# On Ramanujan's Translation

Shama Futehally



IN THE present literary situation in India a good translation has 'cultural' benefits extra to those which a successful work of literature normally has. It is, therefore, worth looking closely at the usual kind of success and failure which is achieved by our translators, and attempting to analyse it in some degree.

A large number of translations fail, of course, for obvious reasons: lack of adequate knowledge of one or the other languages on the part of the translator; lack of care, sensitivity or humility in regard to the original work. Such translations will continue to proliferate, and nothing can be done about them except to hope that the original works will find their true translators somewhere. It is better worth thinking about translations which have none of these obvious flaws -- indeed, where the translators are first-rate scholars whose motto is 'handle with care' -- but which, nevertheless, do not quite succeed. Such translators would include Daniel Ingalls in his translation of Vidyakara's Treasury called *Sanskrit Poetry* (Harvard University Press), Barbara Stoler Miller in her translation of Bilhana (Columbia University Press), Deben Bhattacharya in his translations of Vidyapati (UNESCO). All these are translations of 'classics', and it is clear that the task of making such literature relevant to the present-day reader is harder than the transmitting of contemporary writing. As translators of classical literature these scholars are, in some sense, path-breakers. Nonetheless they do not provide the kind of translation which leaves readers astounded and joyful -- it only leaves them honourably reading away.



In the field of translation A.K. Ramanujan is one scholar who has succeeded so brilliantly that it is worth piecing together his scattered observations about his method of translation. He has presented ancient Tamil love poetry (*The Interior Landscape*, Clarion Books), medieval Kannada *bhakti* poems (*Speaking of Shiva*, Penguin Classics) and the poems of Nammalvar (*Hymns for the Drowning*, Princeton University Press) in English. For aspiring translators of poetry it is a doleful fact that he is himself a poet and they are not -- even so, a very useful brief for translators in general can be extracted from his remarks.

For a start, we may note that Ramanujan believes that everything *can* be translated or, as he says, 'A translator must believe so, even irrationally.' The condition is that it must meet the right translator -- one for whom 'the poem speaks through him'. This because it is unrealistic to think that the translator can prevent his own personality from asserting itself and intervening between the work and the translation. 'A translation has to be true to the translator no less than to the originals. He cannot jump off his own shadow.'<sup>1</sup> A translator cannot just be a transparent pane, he has to become a mirror; but if he feels close enough to the original work, it will not be too distorting a mirror. Therefore, it is a safe choice to do what Ramanujan has done -- 'I have let the [poems] choose me, letting them speak to my biases...'<sup>2</sup>

Next, he is clear about a precept which many translators now accept: that the watchword of a translator must be literalness. 'In the act of translating, "the Spirit Killeth and the Letter giveth Life"'. Any direct attack on "the spirit of the work" is foredoomed to fuzziness. Only the literal text, the word made flesh, can take us to the word behind the words.'<sup>3</sup>

The trouble, of course, is how to be literal. (I am reminded of the French-English translation course, where participants began by attempting a translation of the phrase 'le bon Dieu' into English. As I remember they continued to try for three days. As they pointed out, a literal translation would be 'the good God', but then what do you do with the good-naturedness of the original phrase, the touch of humour yet not frivolity which is present in these words but not in the word God, nor in The Good God, nor in The Lord, nor in The Good Lord, let alone in The Almighty?) What we want, after all, is not the letter but the Letter.

Being literal, then, would mean not blind literalness but rather the charting out of given material to a new set of coordinates - you have to use your judgement as to what those coordinates should be, but once they exist you have to stick to them with rigour.

In Ramanujan's translations from ancient and medieval Tamil, and from medieval Kannada, he says that he has had to start his 'charting' with the actual physical look of the poems. Both languages were written without punctuation or spaces between the words, or even divisions between the phrases. It is, therefore, impossible to reproduce directly the look of the original on the English page. In any case, Tamil is dense, 'participle-packed' and a Tamil poem of four lines may need to become an English poem of ten lines. His method then is to try and mimic, not the external, but the internal structure of the original -- to use the English tools of space, length of line, punctuation, even typographical arrangements (little blocks of words, 'steps', insets of imagery) as signals to the inner form of the originals. 'I've tried to suggest by spacing the distance or closeness of elements in the original syntax.'<sup>4</sup> About the poems in *The Interior Landscape* he writes that, given the difference between English and Tamil, it would not have made sense to translate the poems line by line -- he had to translate them phrase by phrase, in syntactic units.

About actual choice of words, Ramanujan would hardly be able to indicate the infinitesimal considerations which make him choose one word in preference to another. But here it may be useful to briefly compare a Ramanujan translation with another translation of an ancient Tamil poem. The latter is by George L. Hart III, from his book *The Poems of Ancient Tamil* (University of Columbia Press). It is only fair to add that the author quotes this poem only in order to make a point and not as poetry *per se* -- I am using it here only as a convenient illustration of how scholarly accuracy combined with literalness can nonetheless fail to present a satisfying experience of a poem. The speaker of Hart's poem is a widow who is addressing a potter while he makes the urn which will hold her husband's ashes. She tells him to make it large to hold her own ashes too:

Potter who makes vessels  
listen:



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have compassion on me also,  
 for I have crossed  
 many barren places with him  
 like a little white lizard  
 on the spoke of a shafted wagon.  
 Make wide  
 the urn for the burial ground  
 on this earth  
 with all its great spaces. (p.107)

This is an irreproachably 'straight' translation but if the original poem is a significant one, then obviously the English version does not give us the word behind the words – it does not 'map' the experience of the poem. I think this lack of poetic subtlety can be seen to emerge in various ways if we examine the poem line by line.

In the first line, the words 'Potter who makes vessels' sound too obvious - what else would a potter do? I would guess that there was some other implication in the original which this *arrangement* of words does not capture. It may, for example, be something like 'Potter/maker of vessels' so that the second line reinforces the idea that he is a maker, one who deserves respect. The words 'on me also' which appear in the third line have, in the English, a whining quality which reduces the reader's response to the speaker in the poem. In the fourth line, 'for' is unnecessary; and 'for' in the sense of 'because' usually reduces the contemporaneity of an English poem. Then, 'crossed' is a verb which suggests a very easy action, like crossing a stream. I would think that the line needs a word which suggests weariness and struggle -- perhaps 'travelled' or 'followed'. The last lines of the original, presumably, contained the dramatic idea that the woman speaker wants to die along with her husband – but this is not made very clear.

We can compare this translation to one of Ramanujan's from *The Interior Landscape*. This, too, is about loss and grief:

### *What She Said*

Only the dim-witted say it's evening

when the sun goes down  
 and the sky reddens  
 when misery deepens,  
 and the *mullai* begins to bloom  
 in the dusk.

But even when the tufted cock  
 calls in the long city  
 and the long night  
 breaks into dawn,  
 it is evening:  
                                 even noon  
 is evening,  
 to the companionless.

(*Milaipperun Kantan*. Kur 234)

Here there is no evidence of the kind of verbal carelessness that was present in Hart's poem. The words of the third and fourth lines are arranged so that they retain the reinforcing connection between the deepening of the sky's colour and the deepening of misery. In the eighth and ninth lines the 'longness' (distance) of the city is reinforced by the longness of the night. The language exploits the slightly unusual situation of the flower blooming not at dawn but at dusk.

Secondly, the 'inner structure' of the Tamil poem has been fitted into an arrangement which is simultaneously faithful to the rhythms of English; it does not abandon all loyalty to English metre as the earlier poem does. In the first verse,

when the sun goes down  
 and the sky reddens  
 when misery deepens,  
 and the *mullai* begins to bloom  
 in the dusk.

the long, stretching intonation of the 2nd, 3rd, 4th lines gives way to a pleasurable climax of sound in the 5th and 6th lines. (Apart from everything else, the poem is such a pleasure to *say*.)



Finally, the spacing prepares us for a shock at the end of the poem, which comes with the way the explanatory word 'companionless' is made to explode at the end of the last line. (The message of the poem, as such, is less dramatic than that of Hart's poem, but the drama has been so much more clearly brought out.) The point, as we've been saying, is not whether 'companionless' is indeed the last word of the original, but whether loneliness in that original is expressed with the same kind of shock that it is here.

*Hymns for the Drowning.* Poems for Vishnu by Nammalvar.

Translated from the original by A.K. Ramanujan.

Princeton University Press; 1981; 176pp.; Indian price Rs.70.

A.K. Ramanujan has already published translations of classical Tamil love poems and of medieval Kannada *vacanas*, or *bhakti* poems, by Virasaiva saints. *Hymns for the Drowning* is a selection from the songs of the Vaishnavaita saint-poet Nammalvar, who is believed to have lived in the 9th and 10th centuries in what is now Tamil Nadu.

'Alvar' is the name for saint-poets who sing of Vishnu. There are twelve in the tradition, but of them all Nammalvar is literally 'our alvar'; the greatest, the beloved, the one whose songs are still sung in temple services and recited in a special ten-day festival at Srirangam. He lives in the memory of the people as a figure not of history but of legend: the child who would not eat and would not talk, the saint who broke a lifetime's silence to recite at once over a thousand hymns to Vishnu. These hymns are very much in existence. They are called the *Tiruvaymoli*, and they form an unbroken cycle, because each poem begins with the last word of the previous one. (This device is called *antati*, from *ant* and *adi*.) Most of the poems which are translated here are from the *Tiruvaymoli*; others, in the style of classical Tamil love poems, are from another composition, the *Tiruviruttam*.

To readers who are familiar with the poems in *Speaking of Shiva* (Ramanujan's translations of Kannada *vacanas*) this collection will seem different chiefly in that more of the poems rely on a collective mythology. They are personal communications, indeed they are love-poems; nonetheless some of them speak of the boar, the dwarf, the churning of the ocean, the epic war. The cycles of poems about Krishna have inevit-

ably to refer to the blue-black body, the cows, Govardhana.

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In the mind of the reader of English, these 'standard' allusions have come to seem exotic in an almost garish sense, because of the over-stuffed translations that have gone before. It needs a very fine ear to rescue the myths from this alien weightiness and 'purify' them, so to speak, by resurrecting them in language that is deft and contemporary. The following poem demonstrates how Ramanujan's versions retain the genuine weight of the myths behind them, but are still nimble enough to speak to contemporary readers.

### *The Boar Rescues the Earth*

No, they did not come apart:

the seven islands of the earth,  
they stayed in place;

and the seven mountains  
they stayed in place

and the seven seas  
did not go wild  
but stayed in place

miraculously,  
that day

our lord pitchforked them out  
with his tusks  
from the deep.

Only some of the poems, of course, refer to the myths -- others are just love-songs, plain and uncomplicated. Like *bhakti* poems anywhere, they are wondering, tender, serene, despairing, jealous, possessed. They attempt to reach, to describe, to explain, by asking questions or describing in slow detail or talking to themselves or even, seemingly, by trying to work out puzzles:



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It's true  
even I am you

even the unbearable hell  
of this world  
is you:

this being so  
what's the difference?

One may go to paradise  
and reach perfect joy  
or go the other way  
and fall into hell

yet I being I  
even when I remember  
I am you  
I still fear hell:

lord in perpetual paradise  
let me be at your feet.

(Part 3 of the cycle 'Waxing and Waning')

There are poems spoken by the mother who doesn't know what to do with her daughter who has become infatuated with this most irresponsible of gods. And then there are the seven poems from the second composition, the *Tiruviruttam*, which are love-poems in the classical style. (This will be familiar to readers of *The Interior Landscape*.) Such poems are framed as dramatic monologues ('What She Said to her Girlfriend', 'What He Said', etc.). A closely worked out system of formal imagery tells the reader whether the occasion is that of desertion, or waiting, or union, or whatever. For instance, scenes of lovers' meetings are signalled by the poem being set among (or referring to) mountains, night-time, the cold season. The imagery would include peacocks and parrots, jackfruit and bamboo. So 'infidelity' poems are associated with the countryside, the morning, any season, storks or herons, and buffaloes. There are five such 'landscapes'. I imagine it works rather as references to the koel, or to the gathering of rain-clouds, gives clues to

the reader of so much North Indian poetry. Nammalvar follows these conventions, but the 'he' who is awaited is god, not a man, so the canvas of the usual love-poem is expanded by a single line or gesture. The young girl who is being addressed becomes

dear girl,  
 dear as the paradise of our lord  
 who measured the earth  
 girdled by the restless sea

(*Tiruviruttam* 68)

This last example has been pointed out by Ramanujan himself in the scholarly essay which accompanies the poems. As with his two previous volumes of translation, the value of the book is greatly enhanced by this. Here he places the poetry of the alvars in its historical context, examines the relation between the Sanskrit and the Tamil culture, as also the difference between the aesthetics of *Rasa* and the aesthetics, if it can be called that, of *bhakti* poetry. The essay explores the manner in which the earlier *akam* (love poetry) and *puram* (war poetry) developed towards the *bhakti* form. It analyses the nature of the alvar's relationship with his god and not least, it provides a poet's insights into the poems.

1 *Speaking of Shiva*, Penguin Classic, 1973, p.12.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p.13.

4 *The Interior Landscape*, Clarion Books, p.12.



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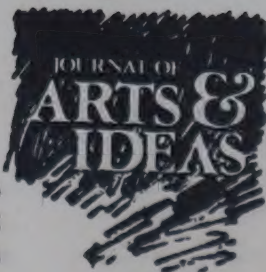
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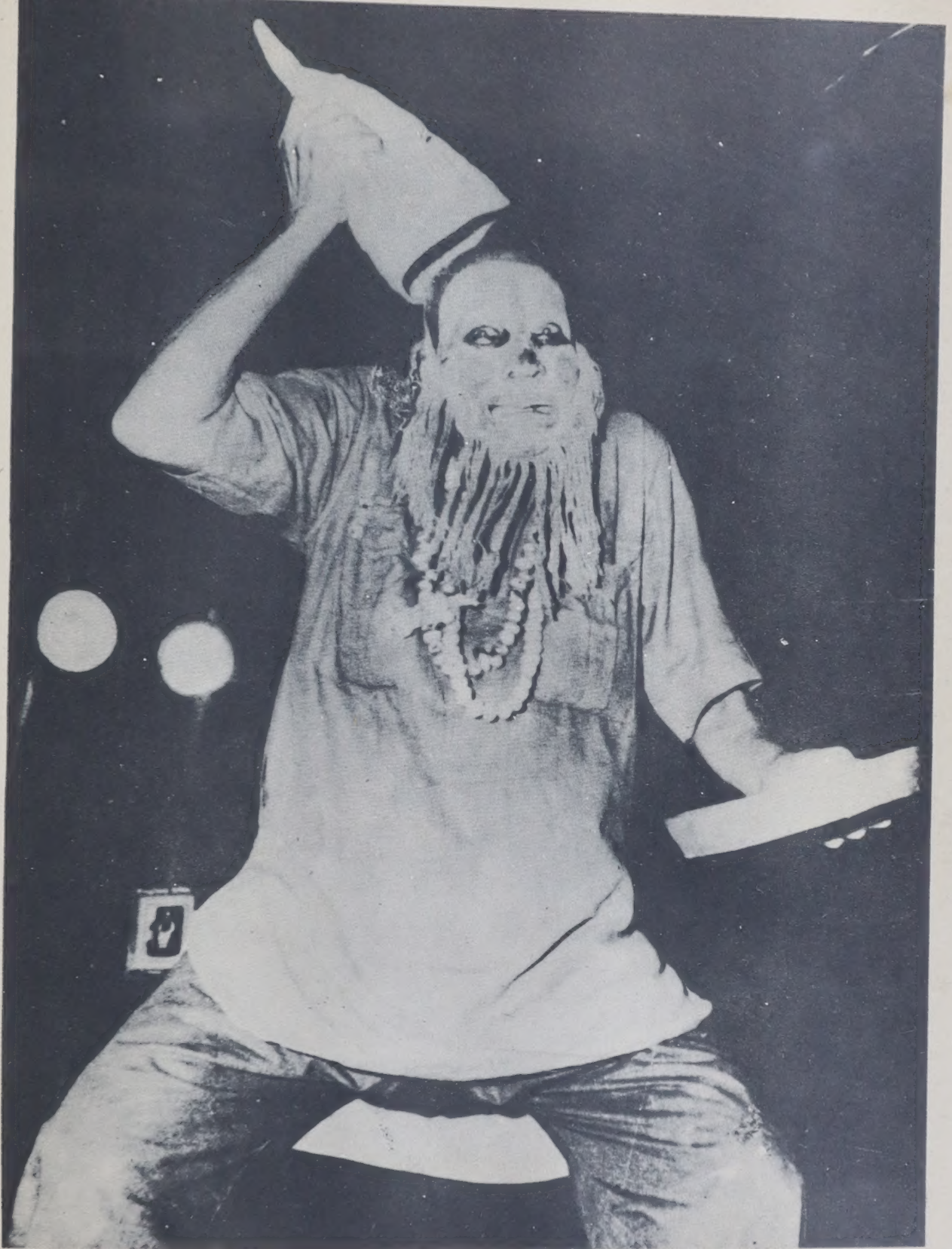
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